Practical Research Methods

A user-friendly guide to mastering research

Dr Catherine Dawson

"A godsend for anyone needing to conduct a research project."

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Practical Research Methods

A user-friendly guide to mastering research techniques and projects

DR CATHERINE DAWSON

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For my Dad

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Preface

This book is a practical, down-to-earth guide for people who wish to conduct research. It is aimed at those new to research and assumes no prior knowledge of the issues covered. It will also appeal to those people who have already conducted some research and who are interested in finding out more about other research methods that are available to them.

For the purpose of this book, research is defined as the deliberate study of other people for the purposes of increasing understanding and/or adding to knowledge. This deliberate study could cover many different areas. As a researcher, you might be interested in attitudes and behaviour – why do people think in a certain way and why do they behave in a certain way? Or you might be interested in numbers – how many people use a service? Perhaps you need to try to predict how this number of people could be increased so that you can obtain funding for your service. Or you might be fascinated by the personal history of a neighbour and have a burning desire to record her history and pass it on to others.

We all have different reasons for conducting research. Some of us might have to undertake a project as part of our course work. Others might have to conduct a study as part of our employment. Some of us may be fascinated by something we've observed and want to find out more. This book offers advice on how to turn your ideas into a work-

able project and how to keep motivation levels high, especially if you have no real inclination to become a researcher. It discusses the issues involved in thinking about your research and defining your project, before moving on to the methods – how do you actually *do* your research, analyse your findings and report the results?

Over the decades there has been a great deal of discussion on what constitutes research, how it should be conducted and whether certain methods are 'better' than others. Although I have touched upon some of these issues in the relevant chapters, it is not possible or desirable to go into any greater detail in this book. Therefore, I have included further reading sections at the end of the relevant chapters for those of you who wish to follow up these issues.

I have been a researcher since undertaking an MA in Social Research in 1987. Working within both further and higher education and as a freelance researcher, I have been involved in a variety of projects in the areas of education, housing and community research. I have taught research methods to adults returning to education and conducted in-house training for employees who need to carry out their own research.

Becoming a successful researcher is a continual learning process in which we all make mistakes. So don't worry if your first project doesn't run as smoothly as you might wish. Instead, remember that undertaking a research project can be fascinating, rewarding and exciting – I hope that you enjoy it as much as I have done and I wish you every success in your project.

Dr Catherine Dawson

1

How to Define Your Project

Before you start to think about your research, you need to ask yourself a few questions.

ASKING QUESTIONS

Why have I decided to do some research?

If the answer to this question is because you have been told to do so, either by your tutor or by your boss, you need to think about how you're to remain motivated throughout your project. Research can be a long process and take up much of your time. It is important to stay interested in what you're doing if you are to complete your project successfully. However, if you want to conduct some research because something has fascinated you, or you have identified a gap in the research literature, then you are lucky and should not have a problem with motivation.

How can I remain interested in my research?

The obvious answer to this is to choose a topic which interests you. Most of you do have this choice within the limitations of your subject – be creative and think about something which will fascinate you. However, if you have had the topic chosen for you, try instead choosing a research *method* which interests you. As you go on to read this book you will become more familiar with the different methods and should be able to find something in which

you are interested. For example, mathematics might have motivated you at school. If so, you may find it interesting to delve deeper into statistical software. Or you might have been invited to take part in a focus group for a market research company and found it an interesting experience. Perhaps now you would find it enjoyable to try running your own focus group? Or maybe you have been fascinated by a particular group of people and you would like to immerse yourself within that group, taking part in their activities whilst studying their behaviour?

What personal characteristics do I have which might help me to complete my research?

Think about your personal characteristics, likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses when you're planning your research. If you're very good with people you might like to think about a project which would involve you conducting in-depth interviews with people who you find fascinating. If you absolutely hate mathematics and statistics, steer clear of large survey research. Are you good at socialising? Do people feel at ease with you and are they willing to confide in you? Or do you prefer to hide yourself away and number crunch, or spend hours on the internet? All of these personal characteristics suggest a leaning towards certain types of research. As you read this book you will find ideas forming – jot these down so that you can refer to them later when you come to plan your research.

What skills and experience do I have which might help in my research?

If your research is to be employment based, the chances are you will have work experience which you'll find useful

when conducting your research project. This is valid experience and you should make the most of it when planning your research. Even if your project is not employment based, all of you will have other skills and experience which will help. For example, if you have been a student for three years, you will have developed good literature search skills which will be very useful in the research process. Some of you may have developed committee skills, organisation skills and time management expertise. All of these will be extremely useful in your research. Think about your existing skills in relation to your proposed project as it will help you to think about whether your knowledge, experience and skills will help you to address the problem you have identified.

Many research projects fail because people don't take enough time to think about the issues involved before rushing to start the work. It is extremely important to spend time *thinking* about your project before you move on to the planning stage. Through careful thought you should stop yourself wasting time and energy on inappropriate methods as your research progresses. Consider the following example:

EXAMPLE 1: JAMES

James wanted to find out about students' experiences of housing in his university town. He designed and sent out a questionnaire to 1,000 students. When the replies started to come in, he realised that the questionnaires weren't generating the type of information in which he was interested. When he talked through his concerns

with his tutor, it emerged that James was really interested in attitudes towards, and experiences of, rented accommodation. His questionnaire had been poorly designed and was not generating this type of information. He had to scrap the questionnaire and construct another which he combined with a number of one-to-one interviews to get more in-depth information. He had spent three months designing and administering a questionnaire which had not produced the type of information he required. If he had spent more time thinking about the research, especially coming to terms with the difference between *qualitative* and *quantitative* research, he would have saved himself a lot of time and energy (see Chapter 2).

THE FIVE 'WS'

When you start to think about your research project, a useful way of remembering the important questions to ask is to think of the five 'Ws':

- What?
- Why?
- Who?
- Where?
- When?

Once you have thought about these five 'Ws' you can move on to think about *how* you are going to collect your data.

What?

What is your research? This question needs to be answered as specifically as possible. One of the hardest parts in the early stages is to be able to define your project, so much research fails because the researcher has been unable to do this. A useful tip is to sum up, in one sentence only, your research. If you are unable to do this, the chances are your research topic is too broad, ill thought out or too obscure.

Why?

Why do you want to do the research? What is its purpose? Okay, you might have been told to do some research by your tutor or by your boss, but there should be another reason why you have chosen your particular subject. It might be solely to do with the fact that you are interested in the topic. This is a good start as you need to be interested in your research if you are to keep up your enthusiasm and remain motivated. Or you might have identified a gap in the research literature – this is good as it shows you have carried out careful background research. Or perhaps you want to try to obtain funding for a particular service or enterprise and you need to do some research first to find out if there is demand for what you are proposing.

Whatever your reason, think very carefully about why you are doing the research as this will affect your topic, the way you conduct the research and the way in which you report the results. If you're doing it for a university dissertation or project, does your proposed research provide the opportunity to reach the required intellectual stan-

dard? Will your research generate enough material to write a dissertation of the required length? Or will your research generate too much data that would be impossible to summarise into a report of the required length? If you're conducting research for funding purposes, have you found out whether your proposed funding body requires the information to be presented in a specific format? If so, you need to plan your research in a way which will meet that format.

Who?

Who will be your participants? (In this book, people who take part in research will be called **participants** or **respondents**, rather than 'subjects', which is a term that I have never liked.) At this stage of the research process, you needn't worry too much about exactly how many participants will take part in your research as this will be covered later (see Chapter 5). However, you should think about the type of people with whom you will need to get in touch with and whether it will be possible for you to contact them. If you have to conduct your research within a particular time scale, there's little point choosing a topic which would include people who are difficult or expensive to contact. Also, bear in mind that the Internet now provides opportunities for contacting people cheaply, especially if you're a student with free internet access.

Where?

Where are you going to conduct your research? Thinking about this question in geographical terms will help you to narrow down your research topic. Also, you need to think about the resources in terms of budget and time that are

available to you. If you're a student who will not receive travel expenses or any other out of pocket expenses, choose a location close to home, college or university. If you're a member of a community group on a limited budget, only work in areas within walking distance which will cut down on travel expenses.

Also, you need to think about where you'll be carrying out your research in terms of venue. If you're going to conduct interviews or focus groups, where will you hold them? Is there a room at your institution which would be free of charge, or are you going to conduct them in participants' own homes? Would it be safe for you to do so? Would you be comfortable doing so? If you've answered 'no' to either of these last two questions, maybe you need to think again about your research topic. In 15 years I have encountered only one uncomfortable situation in a stranger's home. It can happen and you must never put yourself in a dangerous situation. Think very carefully about whether your chosen topic and method might have an influence on personal safety.

When?

When are you going to do your research? Thinking about this question will help you to sort out whether the research project you have proposed is possible within your time scale. It will also help you to think more about your participants, when you need to contact them and whether they will be available at that time. For example, if you want to go into schools and observe classroom practice, you wouldn't choose to do this research during the summer holiday. It might sound obvious, but I have found

some students present a well-written research proposal which, in practical terms, will not work because the participants will be unavailable during the proposed data collection stage.

Once you have thought about these five 'Ws', try to sum up your proposed project in one sentence. When you have done this, take it to several people, including your boss and/or tutor, and ask them if it makes sense. Do they understand what your research is about? If they don't, ask them to explain their confusion, revise your statement and take it back to them.

I can't overemphasise the importance of this stage of the research process. If you get it right now, you will find that the rest of your work should flow smoothly. However, if you get it wrong, your problems could well escalate. The following exercise will help you to think more about these issues.

EXERCISE 1

Have a look at the three projects below and see if you can spot any potential problems. What questions would you ask to make the researchers focus in on their proposed project? Do you have any suggestions for the improvement of these statements?

Statement 1: *This research aims to find out what people think about television.*

Statement 2: *My project is to do some research into Alzheimer's disease, to find out what people do when their relatives have it and what support they can get and how nurses deal with it.*

Statement 3: *We want to find out how many of the local residents are interested in a play scheme for children during the summer holiday.*

Points to consider

Statement 1: *This research aims to find out what people think about television*. This proposed project is both broad and obscure. My first two questions would be: what people and what television? Then I would ask: what is the purpose of this research? Who would be interested in the results? TV companies already employ market researchers to conduct a great deal of research into public viewing, and they have much larger budgets available to them. There's little point in repeating research if it cannot be improved upon.

However, if the researcher has an interest in this particular issue, or is perhaps on a media studies course, there are a number of ways in which this research could become more manageable. The researcher could focus in on a particular type of programme and/or a particular type of person. For example, she could decide to show an Open University programme to potential OU students and find out what they thought about the pro-