

Beginner's guide to research

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Carrying out research is now an expected function in many organisations. Such studies are based on questions arising from professional practice, rather than theoretical concerns. The experience of practitioner-researchers suggests that there are three sets of questions to be answered before a research study can be proposed. The first set tests whether there is a sound basis for the research question; the second set explores how the research relates to other studies; and the third set determines whether it is feasible to conduct the study.

Basis for research

What do I really want to know? And why do I want to know it? Does someone else already know this? And if so, can I use what they have found out? What is the significance of this research? What difference will it make? And why am I doing it? If the answers to these questions lead to the conclusion that a project is worthwhile, the next set of questions will set the parameters for the study and show how it relates to other studies.

Relationship to other research

Has someone already developed a data-collection instrument that I can use? Replication studies are very useful, as they allow for comparisons to be made and for differences and similarities to emerge.

How will I make my findings public and who needs to know about the outcomes of the study? Writing up the findings of a study is often not done effectively, and sometimes not done at all. It is important to plan a range of ways of disseminating the findings even before the study has begun.

What level of detail is needed to tell me what I need to know? Can this be a 'quick and dirty' (although still rigorous) study or does it need to be an elaborate and painstaking one?

Feasibility of the project

Can I gather the necessary resources? The resources include: knowledge, skills, personnel, time and money, as well as access to computer software and processing time. It is often possible to scale-back a study before it begins, if sufficient resources are not available, but especially difficult once data collection is underway.

Who else would be interested in the project and/or benefit from it? Often people in the organisation, community or profession are willing to be partners in research projects. Their involvement strengthens the project by broadening the resources available and creating a possible reference group, to offer advice and support. In larger-scale projects, this can be crucial in maintaining the momentum of the research.

Is it realistic to think that I can carry out this project alongside my other responsibilities? Research in professional practice is essentially a collaborative activity. There are a variety of potential roles and relationships. It may be more appropriate to act as project manager than as principal researcher. Some larger libraries have successfully set up study circles, where staff take part in a research project, sharing the roles and responsibilities, and at the same time using the process as a staff development exercise. It may even be necessary to contract out the research to companies that specialise in the field.

Once there are satisfactory answers to these questions, the exciting part of exploring the mechanics of information provision can begin and the intellectual and technical challenges of carrying out research in professional practice seem somehow less daunting. ■

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