Research strategy

This page will help you think through your **RESEARCH STRATEGY** - that is, what you want to investigate, and how you will go about doing that.

Your research strategy is explained to the reader in your methodology chapter; a typical methodology chapter might look something like this:

- Introduction to Chapter 3
- Research strategy
- Research design
- Participants
- Sampling procedure
- Method(s) of data collection
- Procedures of data collection
- Method(s) of data analysis
- Validity and reliability
- Ethical Issues
- Conclusion to Chapter 3

These elements tell the reader what you have done, and most importantly, WHY you have chosen to do it the way you have. This chapter is your chance to justify the means and methods you have used to answer your central research question. The chapter should be based on the literature in the field.

The process you go through to arrive at such a chapter might look something like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>A general approach to studying research topics</td>
<td>Quantitative, qualitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td>A specific research technique</td>
<td>Social survey, conversation analysis, interview</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Adapted from Silverman, 1993: 1

In other words, your methodology looks at the sorts of *things you want to find out*, and your methods are the *ways you go about doing that*. 
All research takes place within a conceptual framework - your conceptual framework is, in essence, the lens through which you view things. In terms of research methodology, there are two overarching frameworks:

- The Objectivist or Positivist Paradigm
- The Subjective or Interpretive Paradigm

These are umbrella terms. You might also want to think about your attitude toward research - which of these describes you best?

The NORMATIVE attitude, often associated with positivist work:

- Conviction about what it is important to look for
- Confidence in your research instruments
- Reality is seen as relatively unproblematic
- Steps - decide what to look for, devise instruments, approach the research subject

The INTERPRETIVE attitude, on the other hand:

- Conviction that what is important will emerge from the data
- Confidence in your ability to devise procedures to fit the situation
- Reality is seen as rather mysterious - you can interpret it
- Steps - decide that the subject is interesting, explore the subject, decide what to focus on, devise instruments. (Based on Holiday, 1994)

However, as many authors have pointed out, this rigid division is all very well in literature but in practice, a great deal of research mixes the two, and contains within it both quantitative (positivist) and qualitative (interpretivist) methods.

Rather than worrying about rather petty distinctions between constructivism and social constructs, given that no one is suggesting that we have direct experience of an objective reality, we should be more concerned with finding better ways of describing what we do experience (Rorty 1999). For the present we could do worse than adopt a position of being ontologically largely realist (there must be something for us to research), epistemologically somewhat relativist (trying to make sense of and unify different perspectives), and methodologically fairly pragmatic (using whatever methods it takes to get the job done).


Having said this, research methods still fall into one of two categories: qualitative or quantitative. The two may be thought of as below:

### Qualitative

- Ideas, signs, meanings, works
- Greater emphasis on the researcher
- Generates hypotheses
- Looks at why things happened

### Quantitative

- Numbers, itemisation
- Tests hypotheses
- Looks at what happened

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualitative</th>
<th>Quantitative</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subjective – individual’s interpretations</td>
<td>Objective – measurement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich, time consuming, less generalisable</td>
<td>Tests hypotheses, can miss context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describes</td>
<td>Classifies, counts, constructs models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-research quandary – CRQ</td>
<td>Pre-research certainty - CRQ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data – words, pictures, objects</td>
<td>Data – numbers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emic (insider’s POV)</td>
<td>Etic (outsider’s POV)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Many research projects use a mixture of these - you might have a large scale survey (mainly quantitative) and a group of smaller, in-depth interviews. This article describes a project which did just that.

There is another division within research - emic, and etic. Emic research is from the inside - etic, from the outside. Therefore, if you are a teacher in an international school, you could do emic research on the group of people who are teachers in international schools. You could not, however, do research on emic research on students in international schools; they are a group you know, perhaps know very well, but you are not a member of that group, you are not inside that group. It’s just as well to be clear not only for yourself, but for your reader, which camp your research falls into.

Within educational research, there are many traditions, as the diagram below shows. This page cannot cover these in depth; refer to the literature on research methods for fuller explanations; again, you will need to be clear where your project sits - and it may well span more than one area.

A central Research Question – CRQ

Your research needs to have a central, driving question or idea - the Central Research Question.

• Provides the focus for the investigation
• Provides the framework for the conclusions

Within or under this, you will probably have a series of other questions, which relate to the CRQ.

Good research questions are:

• Clear (you and the reader understand what is being asked - make sure that your questions are clear and easy to understand)
• Specific (they cover one, specific idea. If you have two things to investigate, have two questions)
• **Answerable** ("What makes a good teacher?" is quite probably unanswerable - there are too many variables - teacher of what age, where, when? "What makes teaching effective in THIS situation for THIS age group in THIS context?" is a much more specific, and therefore answerable, question).

• **Interconnected** (Don't try to investigate a number of unrelated ideas in one dissertation - you have neither the word length nor the time!)

• **Substantively relevant** (You will be spending a great deal of time on your dissertation - make sure the subject is one that will be a driving force for you through that period)

(Punch, 1998)

Once you are clear on your research questions, you need a plan for your research. This will entail the selection of means of data collection, of data analysis and of reporting.

One issue you will face is that of **SAMPLING**.

It is highly unlikely that you will be able to reach or get data from every member of the group in which you are interested - the entire group (say, teachers in international schools) is the POPULATION. From within that population, you must choose a SAMPLE, that is, those from whom you hope to collect data.

Your methodology must include a sampling strategy, and your methodology chapter must show your strategy, and the literature on which it is based.

There are many ways of explaining and thinking about samples, but in general, there are two main types: random and purposive (or non random). In a random sample, every person in the population has the same chance of being included in the study. In a non-random sample, participants are chosen by some direct, purposive means.

Having found your questions, and your sample, you need to choose your tools for collection of data. Again, it is best to refer to the literature for more indepth analysis of which tools are most appropriate for your study. The majority of educational research projects use some combination of interviews and questionnaires.

Research is messy, messy business. When it is written up, it seems to be quite straightforward, but in reality, it is an interative process - thinking about one bit means that you have to go back and re-evaluate work you've already done. This makes sense, when you realise that the whole purpose of doing research is to learn something you didn't know before - but because you know more now, the work you did some time ago may need to be updated. The next two illustrations give two different representations of the process of doing research:
Box 6: The research spiral

- Choosing a topic
- Writing up
- Thinking about methods
- Reading for research
- Collecting data
- Analysing data

(Blaxter et al, 1996:9)
One final thing to consider: **ACCESS**

Will you be able to obtain access to the sources and respondents you need, to collect your data? Perhaps you will need to collect data from teachers in a variety of schools, or from a group of parents or students. Thinking how you will do this - who do you need to contact? do you need permission, and from whom? - needs to form part of your research strategy.

Further reading:


