

Planning an Inquiry

This document sets out one possible scheme in tackling the planning of an inquiry. You may use some or all of the headings, and perhaps additional headings. I have used an ongoing, hypothetical example in grey text so you can see what the plan might look like. I have used an example that I might have undertaken as a lecturer, but your inquiry will of course be located in your own practice.

Title

This should be a single sentence that sets out the main topic and context of the inquiry.

Example: An Exploration of Student Views on the use of Social Media on the BAPP Arts Programme at Middlesex University.

Aim

One or two sentences on what you want to achieve. It should be aspirational, setting a goal you are seeking to achieve.

Example: This Inquiry seeks to explore student views on the use of social media on the BAPP Arts programme to inform subsequent curriculum developments.

Objectives

A sequence of actions, that if properly conducted, will lead you to arrive at your aim. These actions may be implemented at the same time, may follow in sequence or occur simultaneously. If the aim was to cross a river, the objectives would be the stepping-stones you place to help you get across the river, which if diligently followed, would lead you safely across.

Example:

- Read some guidance and literature on Focus Groups (in Action Research literature);
- Read some of the literature on action research processes;
- Develop a set of focus group questions;
- Gather a focus group of students;
- Hold a focus group meeting;
- Analyse the data from the first focus group;
- Hold second focus group, discussing first meeting findings;
- Analyse the data from the second focus group;
- Hold third focus group, agreeing main findings by students;
- Final analysis of the my notes on the focus group meetings giving a fair representation of what the focus group thought;
- Write up report.

Schedule

This is a timetable that tells you which objective is undertaken when. It will help you to plan the actions you need to take, as well as telling you if the schedule starts to slip. There are lots of free tools out there and the 'Gantt Chart' is a specific tool that can be used for this purpose:

<https://www.smartsheet.com>

Rationale

This is about the background of the inquiry, the context and the purpose for the inquiry. This section is a justification for the inquiry, why it is relevant to you and/or others, worthwhile and why you are well placed to undertake the inquiry. It should be an argument for why the inquiry should be undertaken. It needs to be succinct, clear and coherent. Keep the rationale tightly focus, avoid over-generalised questions (e.g. what makes good teaching), simplistic questions (e.g. 'how to become the perfect dancer') or dichotomous questions (e.g. is X better than Y), or to prove your pet theory (Why X is best).

Example: This Inquiry is focused on developing some insight into the views of students on the use of social media within their programme of study: BA Hons Professional Practice Arts at Middlesex Univeristy. While the use of social media has been growing across the higher education sector, this programme makes extensive use of social media, and therefore understanding students' views may impact within, and beyond the local context of the programme. The use of social media has expanded very significantly in recent years, and has opened up new possibilities for education. While there are many studies on the technology itself, there is relatively little on the views of students themselves. Etc. etc.

Literature and Documents

The literature are the sources you have, or intend to access to inform the inquiry. It may include books, journals, websites, performances, workplace documents etc. The literature is something that informs you on the conversations that have taken place and bring you to an up to date understanding within a field of study. Documents are usually more specific to your workplace and give specific insights on the workplace context (e.g. Health and Safety Policy). You should be able to provide at minimum the main literature and documents that you think will be useful and why, although this will develop further during the course of your actual inquiry in module 3.

There are two types of literature, the methodological, and the subject. The methodological literature deals with the methods of gathering and analysing data. You should be clear about why each main piece of literature will help you.

Example: Greenwood, D & Levin, M. (1998) Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change. London: Sage.

In this book, Greenwood and Levin provide a specific 'democratising' intent behind Action Research, and proposed that the 'focus group' is a means to generating a consensus view. The role of the researcher is to facilitate the group, record and codify the group's discussion on behalf of the group.

The second type of literature is about the subject of your inquiry. It might be similar studies or other work that helps to bring some insight onto the subject of your inquiry:

Example: Kvavik, R. Caruso, J. and Morgan, G. (2004). ECAR study of students and information technology, 2004: convenience, connection, and control. Boulder Col: ECAR.

This research sets out the views of student relating to

Inquiry Questions

The inquiry questions are the questions that drive the inquiry forward and address through the inquiry. They might, for example, be the core questions in your focus group, interviews or survey. The questions can be quite open and exploratory in nature, or might test out a hypothesis you might have. The questions are needed at the start of a survey, or might emerge as part of the focus group. At interview, you can have some predetermined questions, and others that emerge during the interview process.

Example (Focus group priming questions): What is the range of views expressed by students about the use of social media on their programme? Are there frequently re-occurring views? Do the views of students correlate to other studies in the literature? Etc. etc.

Ethics

This section discusses the main ethical issues that you predict, and how you will ensure ethical safeguards are put in place. It is normally expected that some reference to ethical guidelines are made, and that considerable thinking about ethics are made beyond ticking the ethics form.

Example: One of the main ethical issues is the 'student' status of participants. Will students be able to make open and honest critique of their experiences about their programme to their teachers? While a focus group is seen as the best method of gathering and validating data, it is proposed to limit the focus group to graduates who may feel freer to express their views.

Inquiry tools / Instruments

This section describes the tools of inquiry that you propose to use, with any critique of any piloting of the tools. There needs to be an explanation of why the specific tools are implicated. You need to be clear about where (or with whom) the insights or understandings lay, and ensure your chosen tool or tools are likely to bring out these insights.

Example: The primary tool in my inquiry is the focus group of students. This is because I am seeking the views of students about their experiences. I believe they may have already some views, but I believe that greater insights will come from a more sustained engagement with the ideas, and therefore propose 3 focus group meetings so the ideas can be developed with the group over time. I think this is most likely to draw out insights and meaningful findings.

Approach to Analysis

This section sets out how you propose to analyse your data. You need to be reasonably clear about how the process of analysis will be conducted. Most often, data is 'coded', that is codes are attributed to data to analyse its frequency and connections to other ideas.

Example: When conducting the focus group, I will propose topics or questions, and then make notes on what people say, especially where there is some measure of agreement or disagreement. These will generate codes that I can use in the second and third focus group meetings to test the extent to which students agree with statements previously made e.g. 'CODE: Data theft - the extent to which students think their personal data is put at greater risk through using social media on the programme.

Resources Needed

In this section you should set out the range of resources you think you will need and the extent to which they are available to you. This may include access to participants, time, locations, materials, computers etc. The emphasis should be on evaluating the inquiry from a resource availability perspective.

Example: One of the real tensions in conducting this inquiry is the availability of students. I have a concern that I will not be able to gather enough students. To ensure this can work, I have piloted the use of Google + with students and we think this will enable the focus group to operate virtually. I have had good feedback from it and believe it will work.

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