

Chapter 36

Research Methods for Studying Virtual Communities

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ABSTRACT

Very often virtual community student researchers find it difficult to decide on methodological paradigms, the choice for methods and their application to use in a given research study. They may stay thousands of kilometres from their study supervisors. Some of them might not have had the opportunity to acquire basic research knowledge and skills while other must have trained in advance research methods. This chapter caters for both these group of virtual community readers. In many instances the possible means of contact may either be by phone or by the Internet. The problems of distance and non-physical contact with their supervisors may deter virtual community researchers from engaging in regular research activities. To complicate the problem of virtual community students are the provisions of authors who write research books who rarely discuss:

- *The philosophical underpinnings of both qualitative and quantitative methods,*
- *How qualitative and quantitative methods can be applied in a research study,*
- *Where they can be applied in the study,*
- *When to apply them in the study, and*
- *What to do to enable the virtual researcher make informed professional decision about the choice of methodology.*

Coupled with these dilemmas are the virtual community researchers' choices of framework for data collection, treatment, analysis and interpretation to make the study report a professional masterpiece. This chapter discusses basic research methodologies to place the virtual community researchers in a comfortable position and clarifies the dilemma inherent in the virtual community research fraternity. Later in the chapter advanced discussion of systematic methodological application where data collected for a research study can be conveniently treated, analysed and interpreted to be able to write a professional masterpiece of a research report as a contribution to the knowledge data base.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-040-2.ch036

INTRODUCTION

Practically, any research textbook will advise on the concept of research: what it is and what it is not (Bryman, 2004; Vos, et al., 2005; Leedy, 1980; Tuckman, 1988; Ary & Razavieh, 1972; Gay, 1976; Nachmias & Nachmias 1981; Barzun & Graff, 1977; Bell, 2004; Anderson, Herr, Nihlen, 1994; Bless & Higson-Smith, 2004; Baker, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Some may provide a list of criteria with which to comply. Others may give some tentative guide as to how to approach a research study. At the beginning of a research study the following are required: research topic, statement of the main research problem, sub-problems, rationale, and literature review, methodological choice that will guide the study, limitation and delimitation of the chosen topic, chapter outline, appendices and list of references.

Furthermore, it will be important to be familiar with the following to be able to situate the study professionally:

- Sketch of the need for the research topic which the researcher feels comfortable and knowledgeable to undertake.
- Discussion of the need to know and clearly understand the philosophical underpinnings of both qualitative and quantitative methods so as to be able to select and apply them professionally.
- Elaboration of the need for the choice of applicable methods and relevant instruments and techniques for the collection, treatment, analysis and interpretation of data; and
- Identification of how it is necessary to interweave the processes listed to expose the relevance of knowing what to do, how to do it and why to be able to address a research problem professionally.

Generally, the first step of a research design is the need for the identification of a research

question and the development of a meaningful research proposal. There is need to decide on the focus of the study and the provision of a statement of purpose after which critical research questions should be considered, which will further focus on the research problem and help to refine the statement of purpose. The rationale is required for the reader to see the need for the study. This is followed by an elaborate literature review that will focus on what has been done previously in the selected area chosen for the study and what has not been done – usually referred to as gap lapse – that would be filled by the present study.

A theoretical framework, which is a well-developed and articulated comprehensive explanation on which the entire research study will depend on for the events to follow, is identified. From this point, the need for data collection techniques comes to focus. In this respect, the general methodological orientation pertaining to the study is required. There is need to pay particular attention to the research parameters within which the required data for the study will be collected as well as the instruments that would be used for this purpose. Elaborate explanation as to how the collected data will be treated, analysed and interpreted comes to attention for consideration at this stage. A general tentative outline of chapters will be required. Time frame should be provided to indicate the beginning and the end of the study. Finally, if the study is financed by an agency where you have to account for the money given for the study then there will be need to provide a budget where a table detailing all possible expenses that would be incurred is provided.

PUTTING A RESEARCH STUDY INTO PERSPECTIVE

Again, a study of research textbooks reveal that after introducing the reader to the research proposal may touch on research types (Myles & Huberman, 1994; Bless & Higson-Smith, 2004;

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