

Film 4: Carrying out your research

Hello, I want to introduce you to a nine stage research cycle that you could use you to structure and complete a piece of research from an initial idea through to writing it up for others to read.

The first stage of this research cycle begins with you identifying an initial area of interest. This may well be quite broad to start with, for instance looking at students' perceptions of their induction to their course. You might then start to narrow this down by deciding whether you will look at your own students or other teachers' students in your institution or another institution. At this stage what is important is your have an initial area of interest that will allow you to find out more about the topic before you begin collecting your data.

This leads you to the second stage of the cycle: your literature review. The literature review is a very important stage in the research cycle, as it is where you will learn more about the topic you want to investigate and then use your 'new' knowledge about the topic to help you plan and locate your research within existing work. Your reading might guide you to research into gaps you have identified in the existing work or you might undertake research that updates what is already known about the topic. Whatever you decide, the literature review will be the backdrop to your research and shape what you do next.

Now you know more about the topic, the third stage of the cycle requires you to identify a research question or questions. Good research questions will:

- Define the focus of research
- Define the boundaries of research
- Define the direction of research

They may also indicate relationships or causes between factors.

Let's go back to our example of students' perceptions of induction and try and sharpen that into a research question that could direct your research. One way of doing this might be to use this question: What constitutes as an effective induction for part-time students doing a blended learning programme? Above all, the research questions you write will inform the methodology you use and hence the choice of methods you employ.

So let's now look at stages 4 and 5 - choosing your research methodology and selecting your data collection methods – and how these are shaped by your research question.

Choosing your research methodology is stage 4. Now let's assume you are going to look at what constitutes an effective induction for part-time students doing a blended learning programme? You now need to decide how you will do this. The first question you will be asking yourself is 'how do I

want to answer this question'? Do I want to concentrate on improving my own practice or do I want to look at what someone else is doing, or do I want to look from a particular perspective, say the views of some students? Answering these questions will start to narrow down your choice of research methodology. If you want to look at your own practice then an action research approach will be most appropriate, if you want to look at other people's practices then you could choose a case study approach or a phenomenological approach could give you a chance to focus on the students' experience of induction.

Once you have your research question and you have chosen your research methodology, you need to decide the most appropriate data methods instruments you will use to collect the information you need to answer your research question. Data collection methods are aligned to particular research methodologies. For instance, if you are trying to find out what students think of their induction then you likely to use one or more of the following data collection methods: individual interviews, focus groups with a group of students, a questionnaire or reviewing documents, such as course reviews, that tell you what they think about their induction.

Just before you start collecting your data you will need to complete the 6th stage of the cycle and obtain permission to carry out your research from the organisation you are carrying out the research and those you want to participate in the study. This is also called informed consent and will require you to complete some forms related to the ethical clearance for your research. Once you have these permissions and your tutor has signed off your paper work, you can move onto collecting your data.

The seventh stage requires you to collect your data, and normally you will pilot your data collection instrument or instruments as part of this process. So once you have fine tuned your data collection methods, you can finally begin to collect your data.

After you have collected your data, you are ready to start the eighth stage of analysing your data. Here you will be reviewing the data you have collected; identifying any emerging themes and linking your findings back to your literature review. This will help you do what Wellington (2000, p.137) calls, 'locating your data into existing work'.

Finally, you will draw some conclusions from your findings and make some recommendations. This is the tenth stage and concludes your research.

Following this 9 stage cycle should help you to structure and carry out any research you want to undertake.