

CHAPTER THREE

DESIGNING e-RESEARCH

It is the theory decides what can be observed. Albert Einstein

Because the net is a large, multipurpose, evolving tool, determining its best use in any research application is a challenging task. However, the net is also famous for spurring innovation at "Internet speed", frequently leaving authors of paper books struggling to keep up. In this chapter we discuss what is perhaps the most important and challenging task of the e-researcher— to design research that asks meaningful and answerable questions and that coherently, the sponsor of the research, and the subjects of investigation.

Considerable research is being conducted using the internet as a data-gathering, analysis, and dissemination tool, even though the advantages and disadvantages of using the internet for these purposes remain relatively unexplored. Often, those using the net do so with little guidance with respect to what kind of research data is most appropriately collected online. Based on work by early adopters of e-research, it would appear that when the researcher has a good understanding of the net (including its culture and technological limitation and advantages) that almost any kind of research could be effectively adapted. Further, when creatively approached and thoughtfully designed, research can be conducted and disseminated using the net with a number of notable advantages, which are discussed in the last section of this chapter. This being said, there are circumstances under which the net will be of little or no use to the research process. At one time, for example, the net was only useful for observing activities that took place on it. Now, however, net-based surveys, focus groups, interview data about events that take place both on and off the net. Much of the research in the social sciences and education focuses on processes that cannot be seen and measured with external and quantifiable tools (e.g., the internal mental processes of learning). Since these processes are invisible, it takes the innovative skills of the researcher to develop both net and non-net techniques to understand