

The most helpful part of the Social Research Methods site was the part on selecting a problem to research. I find that when faced with a topic like Education, there are seemingly infinite topics to choose from. I plan on using the concept mapping strategy to try to map out education as I see it, and help me to define a problem. Then, that problem will shape my research. I found the web site to be a little more practical than the book. I really liked how the site guides you through the various steps and offers advice and tips in a friendly peer-to-peer way rather than in an instructional way.

When looking at social research I find it to be a pretty effective method for researching. I think the idea of starting with a social problem makes a lot of sense. I really liked Trochim's distinguishment of empirical and theoretical research. While theoretical research certainly has its place, I definitely fall more along like line of empirical research. Like I mentioned last week, I love data. And if you have collected the data correctly, and you apply it correctly to your research, it is very hard to argue with. While most research is not concerned with proving an absolute point, but rather generalising and finding probabilities, it is still important to gather enough data to prove the strength of your generalizations.

That being said, I think qualitative research has its place. Trochim talks about nomothetic research and I think that's an important characteristic of research to keep in mind. When looking at general cases, and trying to prove a concept generally rather than specifically it's important to include qualitative research that speaks to the context of the hypothesis. For example, when researching Native American cultures, one should study the lifestyles and customs of the Native Americans. That way, one can better understand the quantitative data (average lifespan, mortality rate, disease rates, etc.) and better present the research as valid.

I think the important thing to remember across any research is that there will always be edge cases, and outliers. As Trochim suggests, research (contrary to popular belief) does not set out to prove every point and state absolute truths. Research is about studying data (whether qualitative or quantitative) and drawing conclusions based on your findings. Sure, if you study 5 students and their ability to subtract 4 minus 2, you may find 5 students who will get the problem right. But the more you expand your research, say to 5,000, you're much more likely to find that some will get it wrong. I think the crux of any attempt to present an argument relies on the researcher's diligence and focus on gathering enough data to be reliable, while still being realistic. It's obviously up to the reader to determine in their mind at what ratio something becomes valid. With the example above, how many students should we survey with that math problem before we can make valid conclusions about what we find. This is completely subjective. One person may be ok with 5 students. Another could say that even 5,000 isn't enough. It is the job of the researcher to provide enough data, and even more data behind that, to back up their hypothesis. Taking all of that into account, those consuming the research should realize that researchers usually set out to prove trends, patterns, or generalizations, not absolute points.

My Response to Mark Lonergan

Mark you make an interesting comment about inductive research. This may be more of a business concept, but when you notice a performance gap, identify patterns, and formulate a hypothesis, to what degree do you consider the long term effects of a decision. I find that often

(especially in education) there are decisions made to fix the short term. For example, let's lay off the drama teacher to save some money on the budget. But what happens 3 years down the road? Performance in other subjects begins to drop, student engagement plummets, as does student learning. Earlier research would have proven that a number of students relied on the arts to give them motivation and propel their learning. (I'm not making any kind of argument here, just an example) So this brings up two points. One, obviously letting the drama teacher go solved the budget issue. But it caused a far greater issue down the road. How do we, as researchers present the whole picture of our hypothesis so as not to cause negative long term effects as a result of what may be our short term hypothesis. Next, is an ethical point. It doesn't take a researcher to be able to say the cutting a salary narrows a budget gap. But some amount of research could have revealed the ensuing student engagement crisis. What role do researchers have to present the whole picture? If we find enough research to prove our hypothesis in a satisfactory way, what responsibility do we have to continue poking, prodding, and studying to find out what other factors may impact the hypothesis? And if yes, at what point do we stop?

My Response to Joseph Scipione

It's interesting that you talked about keeping an open mind about a research method. That really stuck out to me in reading about the various research methods. I think your point that sticking to one method may not work for someone is absolutely correct. I think that as you begin research it's important to be flexible and adapt to the information you find. In Software Development there's a methodology called Agile that is a set of practices and guidelines for efficient software development that reacts well to change. I think it is a great theory to apply to educational research since the landscape is changing and what is true when you start researching may not be true when you finish. Sticking to one method and not adapting to change may blind you from seeing the change and adjusting your research according to the change. I suppose this breaks the idea of sticking to a method, but similar to when Agile broke into the Software Development world, it was a massive shift, but has completely transformed the way products are developed and infinitely improved the results.