

Chapter 14

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Why you might find this chapter interesting

This methodological end piece for the book draws together many of the priorities and 'rules of thumb' that we have developed and lived by through the projects in Part Two. We begin by exploring the 'fit' between the values of researchers and their clients. Whilst a degree of disinterested objectivity is required of us as researchers, we inevitably (as experienced professionals) hold to sets of values that shape our world. If these values prove to be in conflict with those of the client / sponsor, some hard choices are inevitable.

Thereafter, in the chapter we explore the lessons we have learned about the effective conduct of research projects. About the critical role of research design, about instrument design, and about the many facets of being an effective observer of classroom activities. Once the data have been captured, we explore some of the approaches we have used for bringing it to life both for ourselves and for others; making it understandable, meaningful and immediate (particularly through data compression and graphic approaches). We conclude with the point we made in Chapter 4 of Part One that researching is a very design-like activity.

We were emboldened to get into research in the first place in part because we saw it as a designerly kind of activity. Once inside it we felt free to exercise our creative talents. This does not mean that we assumed a licence to be dilettante, but rather that, given a specific research challenge, we developed all kinds of tools (sometimes very unusual ones) to give us some purchase on the issue in hand. Sometimes these tools have empowered us to **gather** data more effectively, sometimes to **organise** those data in new ways, sometimes to **analyse** data and sometimes in the **presentation** of data

both to ourselves (to aid our understanding of the issues in the data) and to our clients and stakeholders (to get messages across).

As we have worked through projects over the last 20+ years, we have therefore developed a set of understandings that are manifested in a range of approaches that we have introduced to generations of research students at Goldsmiths. It seems appropriate to outline some of these approaches here as a methodological end piece for this book.

1. THE CHALLENGE OF VALUES

Any research methods guide will underline the importance of getting a clear starting point, and we would absolutely agree with that. Teasing out the questions that one is trying to answer through the research is a necessary and sometimes complex process. The more precise the questions are, the easier it is to decide what will count as data to enable us to answer them.

Part of the complexity in this process of elucidating research questions derives from the common occurrence that the clients/sponsors of research are unclear themselves about exactly what they want. It frequently takes a good deal of negotiating to dig out what they **really** want to know. The process is just the same as when a lay person commissions a designer or architect or gardener to generate a new product/living space/garden. The lay person will typically have some vague notions of what they want. They might have cut out pictures from magazines or (in rare cases) sketched for themselves what is in their head.

But it then remains the job of the designer/architect/gardener to bring their expertise to the task. This is ‘what-if’ time. What if it was like this? What if it did that? Would it be good if? Would you like it to do that? In doing this, the creator is not throwing **solutions** at the client, but is rather trying to tease out their response to see what excites or interests them. The process is all about digging out the **values** that the client is trying to embody in the work. Are we after a peaceful/tranquil garden space; or a formal architectural space; or a space of light and movement; or; or; or.

It is precisely the same with research clients. We offer up tentative solution types to gauge reaction and thereby get a better grip on what is really wanted. Are they looking for a **statistic** that will convince a policy body or a collection of case study examples to **illuminate practice**? Or do they seek **to shape that practice** in particular ways? Not infrequently the client will say ‘yes’ ‘yes’ and ‘yes’... we will have all of that. At which point it is our turn to point out that **everything** is not an option unless there is lots of time and money. So we help them to prioritise what they **really** want, and what might be a nice added extra. These underlying value debates then directly shape what we might do in the research.