

What is Methodology?

You will need to decide what approach – qualitative, quantitative, mixed method – you will use in this module, and what methodologies you will employ. To help you, we have highlighted some below, however, it is important to remember that this module involves a very small-scale piece of research, so keep it simple at this point in time. The reading you undertake during this module however, will be invaluable in terms of the choices you make for your larger work-based learning project.

At this point, a reminder of one definition of methodology from earlier in the workbook might be helpful. Collis and Hussey (2003: 55) define the term ‘methodology’ as “the overall approaches and perspective to the research process as a whole and is concerned with the following main issues:

- **Why** you collected certain data
- **What** data you collected
- **Where** you collected it
- **How** you analysed it.”

Costley, Elliott & Gibbs (2011: 87-89) define a number of methodologies related to work-based settings in the extract below.

Phenomenonological Approaches

Phenomenonology is in essence a philosophy or a paradigm rather than a specific methodology but...has given rise to a particular approach to research and action that, rather than seeking external realities, puts aside existing preconceptions and theories and aims to gain a deep understanding of individuals' perceptions.

Phenomenonological approaches are powerful for:

- understanding subjective experience
- gaining insights into people's motivations and actions and
- cutting through the clutter of assumptions and general wisdom

This research is often associated with discussions-as-interviews, but phenomenonological principles can be used to inform a wide range of approaches to research and practice including ethnographic studies, case studies, action research and interview-based studies.

Action Research

Stemming from the work of Kurt Lewin in the 1940s, action research was originally a means of assisting people to move forward through enquiry into issues in their own lives. It has become widely used as a methodology for practitioner and collaborative research as it provides a straightforward way of taking a researching approach to practice or change.

Many forms of action research follow a cycle of four stages:

- planning, acting or creating change
- observing and data gathering
- reflecting and
- decision-making

The 'plan-do-study-act' cycle used for business improvement is a form of action research and similar principles are used in soft systems methodology. Ethical issues need careful consideration in action research due to the potential effect of changes on participants.

Fisher (2007: 54) give the following examples of "typical action research projects":

- A manager or team leader developing their leadership practice. They would change their leadership style, perhaps following the precepts of a particular theory, and use the feedback from their staff to adapt and further develop their leadership values and behaviours.
- An organisation may have decided to provide mentors in support of a major new ICT implementation. Action research could be used to develop the method and values that would be appropriate for mentors in that particular context.

Ethnography

This is a broad methodological category within which different methods, normally qualitative, can be employed. Its main principle involves going into (or being in) 'the field' and collecting primarily unstructured data through methods such as observation, discussions and interviews to explore and illustrate a social situation.

Ethnography is sometimes conflated with **participant observation** where the researcher is also a full or partial participant in the situation (an insider or participant researcher) although it is possible to undertake ethnographic research as an outsider.

Ethnography is potentially a useful approach to research in a situation where the researcher already plays an active part (for example, within an organization or a community of practice) or can be seconded into an active or observing role.

It has its roots in anthropology, where social groups are studied, so in essence is too wide an approach for this module.

Case Study Research

Not a methodology in itself, this is an approach that can draw on a variety of methods (quantitative and qualitative as appropriate) to assemble a single case or a small number of cases. Its purpose is to investigate and present an example in a way that is of use beyond its face value, for instance to draw out points that have potential for wider application or to illustrate problems in policy or practice.

A case study approach can be used to present projects and sequences of actions as well as specifically researched instances, giving it particular relevance to writing up practice so it is of wider value and interest. Case studies aim to illustrate and describe particular instances or episodes in a way that has relevance to other examples, rather than presenting them as unique, or assuming that the findings may be generalised.

Experimental Research

This is done in carefully controlled and structured environments, enabling the causal relationship of phenomena to be identified and analysed.

The variables can be manipulated or controlled to observe the effects on the subjects studied. For example, sound, light, heat and volume can be manipulated in order to observe the effects on participants.

Studies carried out in laboratories tend to offer the best opportunities for controlling the variables in a rigorous way. However, studies can also be carried out 'in the field'. In laboratories, the artificiality of the situation can affect the responses of the people studied, and the researcher clearly has less control over variables when working 'in the field'.

Methodology and the Assignment

This module asks you to devise and carry out "methodologically sound small scale research", which involves "analysis of appropriate techniques". In that respect, it is important that your research as a whole fits together and makes sense overall.

It is not necessary to focus on the meaning of methodology or on the philosophy or research in this module. Rather, knowing the roots of the methods you choose to use may help inform your choices in order to achieve the "methodologically sound" piece of research.