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ASSIGNMENT 1:

Research Design Evaluation and Critique
Abstract
Research is essential to the long-term sustainability, viability and credibility of the field of distance education. Over the years, researchers have accepted and used diverse research approaches, methods and methodologies despite the bitter debates on the superiority of one approach over the other. The appropriateness of a research method is topic specific. The case study in the article dictated the use of the quantitative method. However, generally speaking, the more credible process is the use of multiple methods.
Introduction

Human beings have the ability to acquire and extend knowledge about things, places and ideas. Traditionally, most of that knowledge would have been gained over time from parents, school teachers, peers, other people, personal experiences, publications, media, and in recent times the Internet (Neuman, 2006, p. 80). Research in Distance Education like all other social science researches involves a systematic process of acquiring, organizing and extending knowledge about the social world. This entails asking of questions, finding answers through pre-determined steps, methodologies, techniques, etc., in order to create knowledge for the improvement of the human society.

Historically, researchers and the research community have never ceased to debate merits, limitations of different research methodologies, the credibility of research findings and the standards for acceptability of ‘new knowledge’. Couch (1987) summarized it as follows:

‘The ontological and epistemological positions of these . . . .research traditions provide the foundation of one of the more bitter quarrels in contemporary sociology. . . . Each side claims that the frame of thought they promote provides a means for acquiring knowledge about social phenomena, and each regard of the other as at best misguided . . . .They differ on what phenomena should be attended to, how one is to approach phenomena, and how the phenomena are to be analyzed’ (1987, p. 106).

These academic debates have thrown up words like, ‘methodology wars’ and the ‘primacy of methods’ (Garrison & Shale, 1994, p. 17). Research experts can be found on both sides of the divide. Lavine (1993) argued that ‘Quantitative social science’, which he called ‘real social science’, faced opposition but it ‘won the battle’, while Dezinin and Lincoln (2003) on the other hand, stated that ‘qualitative research expanded greatly and it is rapidly displacing outdated quantitative research’.

As the debate rages on, other fields of social science research, like Distance Education have had minimal discordant tunes, mainly due to the fact that researchers have come into it from
various backgrounds, which may have been responsible for some degree of tolerance and much less rancor.

**Distance Education and Research Paradigms**

Distance education, historically, is technology driven, the capacity to effectively deliver depends largely on the ability to afford and provide the much needed course, staff, management and technical subsystems. Rapid technological breakthroughs have always had a direct impact on distance education delivery. The cost of acquisition of a new technology could be enormous and could constitute a major undertaking which may be difficult to overlook. The need for a critical cost-benefit analysis before a major decision is made in favor of one technology or the other by an administrator cannot be overemphasized. This could be crucial to the very survival of a distance education program and particularly in a developing economy where finance often is a big challenge. According to Shulman (1997), a systematic process of disciplined inquiry that will ensure reliable and credible research findings is enough justification to deploy the best possible research methods (p. 5).

However, a good research is not a matter of finding the best method only but also carefully framing the questions most important to the investigator (problem formulation), identifying a disciplined way in which to inquire into it and that will yield the results that will enlighten both the scholar the scientific community. In summary, social science research agenda as summarized by Shulman (1997) consist of five dimensions, which are the research purpose, the problem, the setting, the investigation and the research method (p. 4).

Over the years researchers have achieved major successes through the use of diverse research approaches. These include basic/applied methods; Positivists/Interpretive/Critical Social Science methodologies; Deductive/Inductive theories; and quantitative/qualitative methods.

**Quantitative and Qualitative Social Research Methods**

Quantitative method has been defined as a classical scientific research technique that combines a rigorous systematic observation of the social world with careful and logical thinking that could produce new knowledge about human beings, including their relationships and activities.
Usually, a quantitative approach would involve no intervention or manipulation other than what is required to administer the instruments needed to collect the necessary data (Shulman, 1997, p. 10). While objectivity is important, there is also the need for subjectivity and value judgment which is largely emphasized by the qualitative method. This is crucial for the construction of social meaning and the achievement of a sense of social reality in the understanding of human activity.

Shulman (1997) argues that what distinguishes one method from another is not just the procedure that is followed but the type of questions they tend to raise (p. 9). The appropriateness of these methodologies is determined largely by the researcher’s perspective and the nature of the research question. The selection of the method most appropriate for a particular inquiry is one of the most important and difficult responsibilities of a researcher, therefore, the choice requires an act of judgment grounded in knowledge both of the methodology and of the substantive area of the investigation (p. 17). Each method has its strengths, merits, and limitations and therefore the choice should be topic-specific. The fact that the quantitative method has had greater legitimacy overtime has not affected the acceptability and the usability of both methods by the research community.

In spite of these debates, the procedure for conducting research using either method varies only slightly as shown by Neuman’s (2006) seven basic steps of social research: topic definition, the research question, study design, collection, analysis, interpretation and dissemination (p. 13 – 15). The case study below demonstrates a practical application of the seven basic steps of the quantitative research method as sequenced by Neuman (2006).

- **Step 1:** Is distance education cost effective?

- **Step 2:** How does a distance education program stand in comparison with its equivalent in a conventional institution in terms of cost-effectiveness?

- **Step 3:** Sampling institutions (surveys and interviews) with single and or dual mode higher education courses and programs.
• **Step 4:** Design a questionnaire to be administered to managers of the learning institutions, to gather information on their courses, facilities, student fees, etc.

• **Step 5:** Using statistical analysis to determine cost-benefit of each program.

• **Step 6:** Give meaning to the analyzed data, test hypotheses initially stated (the research question), compare results with previous studies, and test for generalization.

• **Step 7:** Disseminate findings to stakeholders and those interested in setting up hybrid systems of higher education.

The above case study is concerned about the cost-benefit of funding distance education programs in comparison with conventional programs and will require in my view, a quantitative value-free judgment (objectivity), credible numerical results that are quantifiably precise, and having the maximum ability to generalize findings to the widest possible population.

Salomon (1991) suggests that on the practical level, the war of the epistemological paradigms should be put to rest. No single paradigm provides a fully satisfactory understanding all on its own . . . Complementarity, then, serves better, fuller, and more satisfying understanding (p. 16). Although differences exist in their basic assumptions, in practice, research methodologies are complementary (Eisenhart & Howe, 1992). The use of more than one approach complements and strengthens the research results making them more credible. Therefore, rigid positions are unhelpful and can only prove to be counterproductive. The adoption of one method while dismissing the validity of another can perpetuate an unnecessary narrow and prejudicial view of human phenomena and the world in which we live (Garrison & Shale, 1994).

‘The key features common to all qualitative methods can be seen when they are contrasted with quantitative methods. Most quantitative data techniques are data condensers . . . . . in order to see the big picture. Qualitative methods by contrast, are best understood as data enhancers, when data are enhanced, it is possible to see key aspects of cases more clearly’ (Ragin, 1994, p. 92).
Phillips (1990) concludes, ‘what is crucial for the objectivity of any inquiry – whether it is quantitative or qualitative – is the critical spirit in which it has been carried out’ (p. 35).

**Conclusion**

This article has stated clearly the relevance of research in the field of distance education, the different research methods and the never-ending debates on the superiority of methodologies and approaches in social science research. Using a small case study the article showed that the choice of a research method should be topic specific.

Finally, the article states clearly that the use of more than one research method is the process that would guarantee credibility and acceptability of results by the research community.
References


