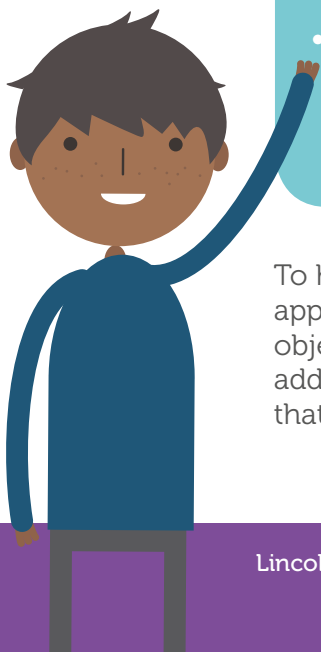# A brief guide to creative research methods

Background

When you are planning to conduct a research project, it can be tempting to pick the methods you are familiar with to gather data (such as focus groups or interviews for qualitative research, or a questionnaire for quantitative research). However, in some instances, these traditional research methods may not be enough, or indeed adequate, to fully address your research topic or research question.

It can be useful to have a range of creative research methods you could apply, to help you work on the research topic or question you are seeking to address. In particular, using creative research methods can help:

- Address more complex research questions, particularly in relation to new trends or aspects of social life, where more traditional methods are not always sufficient to answer these questions (for example, how does the use of new social media platforms impact on people's communication styles?)

- If your research is focused on specific problem-solving (for example, how can online forums be most appropriately designed as a support option for people who are experiencing mental health problems?)

- If your topic or research is new and emerging, where there is a large degree of uncertainty (for example, views and beliefs about the effects of Brexit on aspects of UK society)

- Your research project has a specific aim in challenging, changing or responding to dominant assumptions in society (for example, how are the homeless people perceived by society in general, and what shapes this perception?)

To help you consider the possible research methods and decide on the most appropriate method you could use, you may find it helpful to list the specific objectives of your research, and consider which method(s) will most effectively address these research objectives. The purpose of choosing a research method is that it will enable you to effectively answer your question.

There are **four main areas of creative research methods**, and we will consider each in turn. These are:

1 **Arts-based methods**

2 **Research using technology**

3 **Mixed-methods research**

4 **Transformative research**

1 Arts-based research

Arts-based research focuses on using the artistic process (artistic expression in all forms; written, visual, spoken and performance) as the main way of understanding and exploring experiences of a topic by both the researcher and the participants. These methods can be useful to gather data and to disseminate and share findings. Art-based research methods can be effective in exploring peoples' subjective experiences, abstract concepts where verbal descriptions may not be sufficient to explore or understand them, sensitive topics, topics focused on exploring feelings and emotions, or where participants are children, people who speak different languages, people with communication difficulties, or groups of with mixed abilities.

Examples of arts-based research methods include;

- **Visual art through drawing, painting, photography, collage making, video-making;**

- **Performance art through dance, drama, role-plays, music;**

- **Writing through any story, prose or poetry based activity.**

? **How could you incorporate arts-based methods into your research?**

Why could you incorporate arts-based methods into your research? (what will they help you achieve?)

2 Research using technology

As the name suggests, research using technology is where any part of the research process incorporates technology. This is most likely to be through digital means, as the digital world has gone through so many technical changes and developments that are forming increasingly crucial parts of our everyday lives. It makes sense that these digital technologies should, therefore, be increasingly used to support research. These methods could be used to support data collection, transcription, analysis, and presentation and dissemination of findings.

Examples of research using technology include;

Data collection

- Using online surveys to engage with a large sample of people to participate in your research
- Virtual interviews or focus groups (using online platforms to do so, such as Skype)
- Computer assisted telephone interviews: where the interviewer follows a discussion script that is provided by a software application. Some software applications are able to tailor the flow of questions based on the answers given by participants
- Use of use of social media platforms to gather participants' responses or invite people to take part in your research
- Use of blog posts –writing blog posts, or asking those with relevant experience of the topic to write a blog post about it, can spark conversation and debate around more divisive, taboo or controversial topics
- Using online communities to reach out and engage with hard to reach or niche groups, especially those that may solely communicate about their specific interest or topic online (such as forums for those with particular health needs)

Transcription

- Use of software that can slow down audio-recordings to support easier transcription

Analysis

- Social media listening exercises (where content and posts relating to your topic, usually over a fixed time-frame, are collected and analysed)
- Audio or video podcasts to share and disseminate findings

?

What technological elements could you incorporate into your research?

How will you use technology (what research process will technology support?)

3   Mixed methods

Mixed methods are useful to consider when you are seeking to explore questions or topics that are too complex for one single method to address (for example, to explore the identities of disabled people as they move from childhood into adulthood and their experiences of medical interventions and treatment in society).
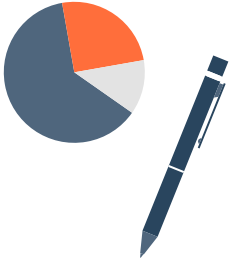
While you may be familiar with the idea of "mixed-methods" as a combination of using both quantitative and qualitative research methods, there is more to this concept than combing telephone interviews (as a qualitative method) with an online survey (as a quantitative method)! It may be a case of using two qualitative methods

(such as telephone interviews and a focus group), or two qualitative methods (such as gathering descriptive data on a topic, to form a hypothesis, and then testing this through correlational research or causal-comparative research).

While mixed methods have traditionally been viewed focused on the data collection stage of research, they can be used to help contextualise, analyse, write, present and share your findings.

> When contextualising your research topic and questions, you might consider using a particular social frame to set your research within, and to then inform your research process, such as "power", "gender", "equality" or "race", to focus your approach to address your research question.

> For analysing your data, you might consider using a range of techniques rather than just one. You could use narrative analysis, discourse analysis and thematic analysis for qualitative data, to see if each method reveals anything different to you; and for the quantitative data analysis, visualising data through graphs, skew, segmentation, and regression.

Mixed methods can also be used to write up and present your findings, and to share and disseminate your findings. To write up findings, in addition to writing up results in a report format, you could use a narrative approach to record results, case studies, poetry or prose. To share and disseminate findings, you could use an interactive or online presentation of findings to engage any relevant stakeholders and people more widely in the results, or if your research has used arts-based methods, you could hold an exhibition, installation or production to share the findings.

> **?** How could you incorporate mixed methods into your research?
>
> Why could you incorporate mixed methods into your research (what will they help you achieve?)

4 Transformative research

If your research is aiming to challenge or change what might be seen as a dominating position or 'status quo' in society, or to challenge or change a part of your participants' lives, you may find it helpful to use transformative research frameworks. These frameworks include participatory, action and community-based research.

Participatory research

Aims to involve the people you are working with through your research in decision-making processes about the research agenda, process and actions. Participants are also able to analyse the information generated, and to reflect on it to generate the findings and conclusions, based on their knowledge and expertise. The participants in the research are the ones who determine the directions taken and ultimately the outcomes and recommendations. This may seem unusual, maybe even counter-intuitive, to the researcher, but can often lead to new insights and fresh understanding of under-represented or marginalised groups.

> Participatory research methods could include: peer-to-peer evaluation, self-reporting, auto-ethnography and ethnography

Action research

Action research is undertaken when the researcher and participants in the research process work together to both diagnose the issue or problem to be addressed, and then implement a solution based on their understanding of the issue or problem. This framework is often associated with research with small communities, such as classroom learning environments, where teachers may need to understand how to overcome problems such as student motivation or attention, and collectively work to find the best methods to overcome these issues with the students themselves. In workplace settings, "communities of practice" can be set up to initiate a reflective process to identify a problem, and work to address the issue and implement a solution. Action research is solution focused, and can help address research questions that seek to find a specific way forward or solution to an issue or problem, such as; *"How can we implement an organisation-wide project management system that meets the needs of all of our staff and our current and future projects?".*

> Action research methods could include: peer-to-peer evaluation, shadowing, diaries, journals

Community-based research

Aims to explore community-based research questions; *"Are local health services meeting the needs of the communities in the area?", "How has the community changed demographically over the last decade?".* This type of research may be of particular relevance to providers of community-focused services, support or information. Only through understanding a community is it possible to know if work you are doing for them is effective or not.

These transformative frameworks aim, overall, to reduce power imbalances and inequalities within the research process and to be able to challenge or change aspects of the social world. While they can be challenging to implement and follow, due to additional time and other resource requirements than other methods of doing research, when used effectively, they can achieve change and transformation in society.

> Community-based research methods could include: workshops, digital story-telling, photography, peer-to-peer interviewing and evaluation.

? How could you incorporate transformative methods into your research?

Why could you incorporate transformative methods into your research (what will they help you achieve?)