Stories from us

The educator’s story

“Twice a semester, we have ‘DSM-IV at the Movies’. These film nights were introduced as a way of using popular culture to introduce the students to some of the life-issues covered in psychological medicine.

“The students are expected to learn a lot of theory and ‘facts’ in psychological medicine, but the real clinical skills lie in understanding individuals’ life stories. The experience is intended to be an enjoyable and less formal way of dealing not necessarily with ‘psychiatry’ but with life issues that affect people’s mental and emotional well-being.

“We generally have a discussion for 15 minutes or so afterwards about issues raised by the movie - this is informal but ‘strategic’ on my part in terms of points I want them to pick up on.

‘I’ve quickly learnt not to reveal the name of the movie prior to the night as that tends to give some students pre-conceived ideas. Even if it’s a movie they’ve seen before, I hope they’ll see it through different eyes through this experience.”

Pam Snow, Monash University

The student’s story

“I was dreading the compulsory research unit in my Masters studies. I had images of numbers, percentages and statistics that I thought would mean nothing to me. I was greatly relieved, and very surprised, to find out how human research could be.

“We studied qualitative as well as quantitative methodology and I learned the joys of ethnographic and narrative research designs, experimental design and grounded theory. We discussed mixed methods and action research and I suddenly thought Hey! I could do this in my clinical practice. There are wonderful examples of research out there that read well: one of my favourite pasttimes is to flick through completed theses at the library. I feel that the research gateway had opened and the mystery has lifted.”

Post-graduate student, 2008

Find out more...

Peninsula Research & Development Support Unit help sheets
www.projects.ex.ac.uk/prdsu/Helpsheets.htm

A series of 17 help sheets about research types and terminology: critical appraisal skills, statistical jargon, calculating sample size, principles of economic evaluation, appraising economic evaluations, the Cochrane library, measuring the quality of life, writing research protocols, qualitative research, preparing data for analysis, systematic reviews, involving consumers in research, preparing questionnaires, enhancing questionnaire response rates, auditing, measuring consumer service satisfaction and focus groups.

Each topic is covered in 2 or 3 pages, producing a snapshot of major terms with further references. As an introduction to research, these sheets provide a summary of common queries and are good starting points for new writers and researchers.

Review

The Australian Learning and Teaching Council www.altc.edu.au

Formerly known as the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, the ALTC has a mission to enhance student learning through supporting higher education in Australia. They provide links to higher education institutes and encourage networking and sharing of innovations through fellowships and educational research grants. Each year, the ALTC awards nominated individuals, and teaching programs, for outstanding learning and teaching activities. The ALTC Fellowship scheme encourages enqury into significant educational issues to enhance Australian Higher Education. Grants are also available for Leadership and Priority Projects. The ALTC Exchange is a new online networking service that will provide learning and teaching resources, and functions to support communication and collaboration across the higher education sector. It is worth reading the award recipients’ summaries: the winning projects can have a health professional flavour and display interesting and innovative teaching practice.

Educational research in health professional education

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About REd

REd is published four times a year by the North West Rural Medical Education Unit of the Monash University School of Rural Health. It provides resources and practical tools for clinical educators. Back issues are available by phoning (03) 5440 9000.

If you would like each issue of REd sent directly to you, contact pam.harvey@med.monash.edu.au.

ISSN: 1835-1891

Educational research aims to look at teaching practice and investigate strategies that improve learning. Researchers use both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to study the concepts, settings, processes and outcomes of learning and teaching. There are many ways of reporting innovative teaching practices, including publication in an appropriate journal.

Most health professionals are familiar with quantitative research reports, those which measure outcomes, and deal with numeric information such as percentages or ratios. But what of those aspects of meaning and experience that cannot be measured in numbers or amounts? Qualitative research aims to investigate questions complementary to quantitative data, and the use of both types of research is now mainstream.

What are you doing in your teaching that others would like to know about? Consider an educational research project based on your strategy – it may well showcase benefits that others can use as well.

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Research is to see what everyone else has seen, and to think what nobody else has thought.”

Albert Szent-Gyorgyi, 1937 Nobel Prize for Medicine
In focus … learning from research in health professional education

Research in health professional education is undergoing significant change as practitioners grapple with questions of knowledge and voice and with what is seen to count as evidence of ‘good’ practice in different educational settings.

Ongoing debates about the contribution of quantitative and qualitative approaches, recognition of differences between experimental lab work and research in naturalistic settings, and the need to ensure ethical conduct of research, makes this an important area for innovation.

Real life contexts

Qualitative educational research differs from documentary and quantitative approaches in its emphasis on gathering information about educational programs, values, issues and activities as they occur with their real-life contexts - often by interviewing participants and eye witnesses.

Qualitative methods used by researchers include in-depth interviewing (individuals and small groups), observation (e.g. of behaviours, interactions, practices, events), story writing, and document analysis (e.g. curricula, policies, reports, meeting minutes).

Systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of textual data (ie. words and images) can generate detailed insights into aspects of individual and group experience not easily captured by numerical forms of analysis.

Going beyond ‘what’

An important challenge for qualitative research is to go beyond the ‘what’ questions to also explore more critical and explanatory questions such as: ‘why’ for, ‘in whose interests’ and with ‘what potential outcomes or changes’.

Combining qualitative and quantitative methods can create new perspectives for thinking about our educational work, for entering into knowledge building conversations and for generating improvements in learning and teaching.

What educational questions or concerns interest you in your role as a clinical teacher? How might you investigate these issues? There is no one right way to ‘do’ educational research and much to be gained by using a combination of different approaches.

Your research can begin now by utilising your health education interests, your reading, your clinical education workplace, and your students and clinical educator peers, and the way in which you ‘notice’ and interpret events.

4. ibid Wellington.
8. ibid Wellington.
11. ibid Eva & Lingard.

Key concepts

Focus groups

Focus groups are a group interview that explicitly includes and uses the group interaction to generate data.

Non-participant/ passive observation

Systematic watching of behaviour and talk in natural occurring settings.

Participant-observation

observation in which the researcher also occupies a role or part in the setting in addition to observing.