

SRHE 2018 Panel Discussion Proposal
Stream: Academic Practice

Exploring the Everyday: Diary Method in Higher Education Research

Convenor: Emily F. Henderson, University of Warwick

Abstract

Diary method enables researchers to enter into the everyday lives of participants in a range of contexts that they are unable to enter or that are too geographically distant to access, and it also facilitates research on sensitive topics. However diary method is under-utilised in higher education research. This methodologically-oriented panel showcases a variety of types of diary research which were used in empirical higher education studies, and invites discussion of the further potential – and the risks – of diary method for higher education research.

Questions for discussion:

- What can diary method do for higher education research that other research methods struggle to achieve?
- What are the specific benefits and challenges of using diary method within a higher education research context?
- Are the ethical and practical risks of diary method worth the insight gained into everyday practices?

Paper

Diary method is an extremely effective way of capturing the everyday life of participants. Given the familiarity of diaries as cultural artefacts, diaries can appear less obtrusive or daunting than observations and interviews, and furthermore diaries allow participants to interpret their world through their own analysis, in their own time, before they bring this to the researcher. Diaries also enable researchers to enter into the everyday lives of participants in a range of contexts that they are unable to enter or that are too geographically distant to access, and they also facilitate research on sensitive topics. However diary method is under-utilised in higher education research. This is surprising, when diary method has great potential for research into academic practices of students and staff, and when reflective writing plays such an important role in the academic development sphere. This methodologically-oriented panel discussion showcases a variety of types of diary research which were used in empirical studies of a variety of higher education settings, and invites discussion of the further potential – and the risks – of diary method for higher education research. All of the panel contributors' studies focus on inclusion in some way: international students (Xuemeng Cao), LGBT-identified students (Michael Keenan), women doctoral students (Rachel Handforth) and academics with caring responsibilities (Emily F. Henderson). This panel speaks directly to the conference theme of excellence/inclusion, by arguing that diary research is beneficial for understanding how excellence meets inclusion in the everyday dimension of higher education.

Diary research can take a number of different forms, and can be adapted according to researchers' specific participants and research questions (Kaur, Saukko and Lumsden, 2017). With the exception of historical research, which may use unsolicited or existing diaries to analyse a social phenomenon, most diary research in social sciences

uses solicited diaries, which are diaries that are written and then collected for a specific research purpose (Cucu-Oancea, 2013). Solicited diary research is predominantly used in the interdisciplinary field where social sciences meets health sciences. In this field, diaries are used to evaluate the emotions and activities of people who are recovering from surgery (Furness and Garrud, 2010), or who are participating in a health and wellbeing intervention (Milligan, Bingley and Gattrell, 2005), for example. Diaries are useful in these studies for understanding participants' behaviour, in order to improve treatment or deliver treatment in different ways, because diaries capture everyday experiences that cannot be monitored to the same extent by health professionals. In higher education research, solicited diaries can be used for equivalent purposes, to more fully understand phenomena that higher education professionals and researchers cannot easily or frequently access (Henderson, forthcoming; Travers, 2011).

Diaries range from highly structured to unstructured, and therefore they can be designed according to the epistemological and theoretical positioning of the researcher. As such, data produced can resemble that arising from a structured observation or questionnaire (Mullan, 2018) or a biographical narrative interview (Taylor and Gannon, 2018). According to the purpose and participants, diaries can take a written form (paper or on-line), or may also be recorded as audio or video diaries, or may take the form of photo or collage diaries (Bartlett, 2012). Diaries may serve as stand-alone data, but they are often incorporated into a multi-faceted methodology. Most commonly, diaries are combined with interviews in what is known as the diary-interview method (Harvey, 2011). In this method, the diaries are used as the basis for the interview. As we show in our panel, diary method is highly flexible in terms of the longitudinal element of diary research; diaries can be used to record a short, intensive period of time, even a matter of hours or days, or across a year or more.

However there are also practical and ethical challenges and issues that arise from using diary method to research any phenomenon (Filep et al., 2017). Each panel discussion contributors, having described their diary method studies, then goes on to critically analyse these challenges and issues. There are a number of different challenges that commonly arise in diary research, including recruitment issues, attrition of participants, variation in quality and quantity of entries, a lack of control from the perspective of the researcher over the nature of the data, the modification of behaviour that results from diary-keeping, and issues relating to personal and private content. Due to the flexibility within diary method, these issues vary according to the precise nature of each empirical study, so the panel aims to show the ways in which these issues play out in different interpretations of the method. Furthermore, the panel contributors consider how the challenges and issues arose in their sub-field of higher education research, thus contributing to the key question of the panel – if diary research can help higher education researchers better understand the everyday nature of where inclusion intersects with excellence.

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