

Case study methods for research in higher education

The potential of case study

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Flyvbjerg (2006) contrasts rule-based knowledge with case-based knowledge, the difference being that the latter is always context dependent. No two practice-contexts are ever genuinely the same and so the rules we seek to guide our thinking and practice are not always useful. To help us understand complex real-life social situations requires either experience or specific cases that we can learn from (Eisner, 1998).

It is unusual for the outcome of a case study to generalize in the way that natural science data can, although this is possible (Denzin, 2009). However, cases provide an opportunity for generalization. Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that there is no reason why case-study knowledge can't 'enter the collective process of knowledge accumulation in a given field or in society' (p. 227). Eisner (1998) suggests that knowledge transfer occurs through a critical process of engagement as ideas appear to the reader: ideas that allow us to see our past experiences in a new light. There is also the 'cumulative' argument based on the idea that many different cases may be telling us similar things (Stenhouse, 1979).

Readers of case studies generate 'personal theories' as they seek meaning in their practices and such an inductive process requires the acceptance that the act of reasoning is a form of theory building. It has been argued that personal theory is important for the reflective practitioner because of its potential to guide action (Schön, 1987).

A note on data

Case study in higher education is usually qualitative but there are no barriers to using any data gathering method (Yin, 1981). One does not have to choose between paradigms because case study often uses multiple sources of evidence and may be practiced as multi-method research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). A qualitative researcher should feel confident to include, for example, quantitative surveys or institutional data archives if these help to answer the research question.

Analytical concepts

Analysis occurs during the literature review, data collection, formal analysis and particularly in writing up. Novices spend too long reading, coding and re-analyzing transcripts while heavily engaged in a new literature and continually finding new ways of thinking about their data. Too much fine-grained distillation at this stage can solidify progress. Moving back and forth between what's out there, the data and our new understandings is crucial but needs a pragmatic approach that gets the job done. To help facilitate this, the time between collecting data and starting to write the research account should be as short as possible. Disciplined writing is probably the

most essential part of the analytical process. A researcher has to commit ideas to paper, write for a particular audience, follow the conventions of theory-use and present the finished account for critique through peer review.

Borman *et al.* (1986) point out that 'each investigatory, analytical and conceptual decision is contingent both on those that preceded and those that follow' (p. 54). In this iterative sense, analysis gradually becomes more critical and we ought to provisionally hold conclusions until we can take our ideas no further. When data feel saturated, in the sense that no more learning comes from the formal analysis or writing, then it is time to call a halt and decide if the work is of sufficient quality to publish or, if more work needs to be done. In case study extra data can be collected at any stage of the analysis because qualitative inquiry is always provisional.

Quality in case study

Case research must bring the reader as close as possible to the experience being described (Fossey *et al.*, 2002) and provide conceptual insight (Siggelkow, 2007). Eisner (1998) suggests that all qualitative research needs to be believable and to achieve this the account should be coherent and provide both insight and instrumental utility. I would add that it also has to be believable in the context of the careful use of evidence in supporting claims. Case study has to serve its purposes while making a contribution to knowledge and the overall theoretical relevance and the quality of an inquiry tends to be enhanced if existing theories are carefully integrated in the work and the researcher aims to make a substantial contribution to the wider theoretical field.

Conclusions

Case study is a 'method of learning' (Flyvbjerg, 2006) and writing for publication drives this to a higher standard. Qualitative research and case study, like all research, has to fulfill its purposes and these need to be worked out by the researcher as a guide to aligning the research process with outcomes. Case study should be judged on how it influences change.

There are many books written on case study methods but because each account is often complex or underpinned by unstated assumptions, following a procedure is never straightforward. Those new to the study higher education experience conceptual and practical difficulties in learning to follow these methods, and I have a strong view that attempting to resolve methodological problems before starting a research project is not helpful. New researchers need to learn from experience while thinking of the rules more as 'guidelines'. Eisner (1998), however, reminds us that we do not have to learn everything first hand.

References

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