

How to Keep a Research Diary

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A research diary is a record of the researcher's involvement in a project. While the contents of the diary are sometimes used as data, they are different from the information, observations, records or other data which are collected because you think they may yield information about the phenomena under study. The diary contains information about the researcher, what the researcher does, and the process of research. It complements the data yielded by the research methodology.

The main reasons for keeping a research diary are:

- ◆ To generate a history of the project, your thinking and the research process.
- ◆ To provide material for reflection.
- ◆ To provide data on the research process.
- ◆ To record the development of your research skills.

Reflective practice in research and the professions requires health professionals and researchers to:

- ◆ reflect on their practices and discourses, that is, what they do, say and write,
- ◆ formulate plans of action based on their reflections and knowledge,
- ◆ implement the actions they have planned, and
- ◆ keep records which accumulate knowledge about the effects of their action.

Researchers use the research diary as a tool to reflect on their research practices. The research diary is an important tool in participatory action research, which can be used by all participants, whether their primary interest is research, professional practice or social change.

Keeping a diary is a useful means to

- ◆ explore your practices,
- ◆ provide a mirror in which you find yourself reflected,
- ◆ get practice and gain confidence in recording research and writing,
- ◆ be empowered as a researcher through sharing experience with peers,
- ◆ engage in supportive but critical interaction between peers and participants.

How

It is important to write in the diary regularly. You should write something every day you do any work on your research project, and also at regular intervals (say weekly). Make a diary entry even if you do nothing else towards the project in a given week.

Some people use exercise books or bound notebooks for their diary. Others use loose leaf paper, special forms or a floppy disk. Nothing in the diary should be thrown away. You should not try to produce a perfectly polished essay. The diary is a record of your developing thought and action, and of the real process of action research and reflective practice. Because your diary entries will be of different lengths from day to day, a printed diary is not a good idea.

It is often useful to make entries under the headings:

Reflection

Plan

Action

Observation

or at least separate your reflection from recording of events and observations.

Some people use a highly structured format using prepared forms. However this is not essential, provided you can find your way around your own diary. It is very useful to leave space for later comments or additions, either in wide margins, on the backs of pages, or in good spaces between entries.

There are no hard and fast rules about style, language, and spelling. Keep your diary in the style which which you find useful, and which helps you to reflect on what you are doing. Critically reflect on you own diary keeping. If you are working with an action research group, use a style and format agreed to in the group.

What goes in?

- ◆ Summary of what happens each day you work on the project.
- ◆ Stories of conversations, discussions, interviews, planning sessions, and so on with peers, co-researchers, teachers, supervisors and participants.
- ◆ Questions and topics for further study or investigation.
- ◆ Guesses, hunches, thoughts, dreams.
- ◆ Diagrams, drawings, mind-maps.
- ◆ Observations.
- ◆ Reflections on what I saw.
- ◆ Reflections on re-reading the diary.
- ◆ Plans for future action or research.

Some of these, such as observations and research plans, will be written up fully in field notes, progress reports, research proposals or other documents. What goes in the diary are the ideas as they occur to you, or as they are being developed. Sometimes people include copies of all documents in their diary, arranged in chronological order.

Reflecting on your practices, performance, behaviours, feelings and actions as a researcher are an important part of your diary. This can include reflections on your diary entries.

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