

Religious Education Support

Second Level Support Service

Research

What is research?

[Noun] Research may be defined as 'diligent and systematic inquiry or investigation into a subject in order to discover or revise facts, theories, applications, etc.: *recent research in medicine*'

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/research>

Based on the Random House Dictionary, © Random House, Inc. 2009.

[Verb] Research as a verb may be defined as follows: to make an extensive investigation into: *to research a matter thoroughly*.

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/research>

Based on the Random House Dictionary, © Random House, Inc. 2009.

Investigation

[Noun] Investigation may be defined as 'the act or process of investigating or the condition of being investigated'

'a searching inquiry for ascertaining facts; detailed or careful examination'.

'A detailed inquiry or systematic examination'

'The act of investigating; the process of inquiring into or following up; research; study; inquiry, esp. patient or thorough inquiry or examination; as, the investigations of the philosopher and the mathematician; the investigations of the judge, the moralist'.

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/investigation>

Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary, © 1996, 1998 MICRA, Inc

'Quantitative researchers collect facts & study the relationship of one set of facts to another. They use techniques that are likely to produce quantified and, if possible, generalizable conclusions. Researchers adopting a qualitative perspective are more concerned to understand individuals' perceptions of the world. They seek insight rather than statistical perceptions of the world. They doubt whether social 'facts' exist and question whether a 'scientific' approach can be used when dealing with human beings. Yet there are occasions when qualitative researchers draw on quantitative techniques and vice versa'

Judith Bell, '*Doing your Research Project*', 2005, (4th edn.), Berkshire: Open University Press, pp7-8

A variety of methods may be employed in conducting research / an investigation. There is no need to stick rigidly to either a quantitative or qualitative approach to research. The context and the subject matter under investigation will have an impact on the methods and approaches that are most suitable. It is a good idea to begin by reflecting on the nature of the inquiry and the type of information required for the purpose of this investigation.

Research methods involving data collection may include some of the following:

- Case study
- Survey
- Narrative inquiry

- Literature searching: library, books, journals, computer literature / internet etc
- Questionnaires
- Interviews
- Visiting a particular place / observation / reflection etc
- Critical examination of evidence

A few points are worth noting here.

Case study – this topic is treated in a separate document by Religious Education Support entitled 'Case Study'.

Surveys

- Most surveys try to access information from a representative selection of the population, and from this sample findings may be taken to be representative of the population in general. It is important to ensure that the sample population is truly representative so that it can be considered fair. For example, it might be important to consider issues such as gender balance, age differentials etc.
- All respondents should be asked the same questions, and if possible, under the same circumstances.
- Questions should be carefully worded to ensure that they mean the same thing to all respondents.
- The results of the survey should help the researcher / student not just to describe a particular aspect of a topic, but to compare, relate one characteristic to another and to show that certain features exist in certain categories (e.g. within a gender or age category).
- Surveys tend to ask What? Where? When? How? - type of questions, but it is not always easy to find out the answer to the 'Why?' questions in this method. Surveys usually do not show causal relationships, but are generally regarded as credible ways of fact-finding.

Narrative inquiry

- Information gathered from peoples' stories may be structured in such a way as to produce valid research findings.
- Interviews are probably the most common source of peoples' 'stories'. Excerpts from participants' stories might be included in the research to illustrate a theme.
- Narratives focus on personal accounts of human experience. Therefore, the researcher / student needs to take extreme care in matters such as ethics, trust, handling of personal information, confidentiality etc. This approach may be best handled by more advanced researchers (e.g. third level) for this reason.

Timing

One of the aims of Leaving Certificate R.E. Coursework is

'to provide an opportunity for students to engage in extended research, analysis, and reflection on a chosen topic'

R.E. Leaving Certificate Guidelines for Teachers, p142

Extended engagement would seem to imply that the process of investigating, reflecting learning etc is important – and therefore not to be rushed. The SEC informs schools through its circulars regarding the completion date for Coursework. This is the deadline for completing Coursework and submitting it in the appropriate booklet in the appropriate envelope supplied by the SEC, to be held securely by the school until it is submitted on the day of the terminal examination in R.E.

However, it is important that adequate time is afforded to Coursework – both the investigation and the reflection (Parts A and B of the Coursework Booklet).

It is a good idea for students to devise their own personal schedules for this work, and that this is checked by the teacher. A good schedule should help students to monitor their own progress at

regular intervals and, when necessary, to apply some extra pressure / self-motivation to keep the process focused and on target.

One way of doing this is to create a list of all the data that will need to be gathered, analysed and written up in draft form. An overall plan for the process of conducting Coursework is advisable – and this should be in written form rather than just in a student's head! Better still – encourage students to display this plan / chart / schedule in a prominent place where they are reminded of its importance. Students should be aware that delays in one area can produce an unintentional knock-on effect in other areas, so it is important to manage their time wisely so that the bulk of work is not deferred to a later stage.

There may be a temptation to spend too long reading or searching through too many internet sites to locate relevant information. Students need to learn the discipline of moving on – keeping the process on track. They may need guidance from the teacher in managing this task.

Reading

Students must be realistic regarding the quantity of material that they can read in order to investigate their chosen prescribed title.

'Any investigation, whatever the scale, will involve reading what other people have written about your area of interest, gathering information to support or refute your arguments and writing about your findings'

Bell, 2005, p62

Systematic recording is important. It might be wise to read, take notes, jot down arguments, counter-arguments, perspectives, insights, questions, reflections – and of course to keep a note of all sources. Encourage students to note for example particular observations / perspectives etc that they may wish to point out in the Coursework, or refer to or quote. It is important to make it clear to the reader if a particular point/(s) is a quotation or paraphrase so that the student does not plagiarise someone else's work.

'Plagiarism is using other people's words as if they are your own'

Bell, 2005, p63

All sources must be acknowledged. This includes paraphrases of other people's phrases and ideas. It might be worth while reminding students that plagiarism is unethical, illegal, carries potentially heavy penalties, and can also be detected using plagiarism software. Plagiarism is a serious offence and a costly exercise to engage in and should be avoided at all costs.

When quoting from someone else's work use inverted commas at the beginning and end of the extract (see quotations documented above). Record the relevant page number. Any words that have been omitted from the quotation should be replaced by three full stops, as follows: ...

From the outset it is important that students ask whether they can trust what they are reading. How reliable is the source? Is it biased? If so, why? What evidence is offered to support any findings mentioned? Does any other source corroborate a particular source? Usually a reliable source has at some other sources to corroborate it. What is known about the author?

It is important to be organised when gathering references. Discourage students from jotting down references on occasional scraps of paper! References should be recorded in one notebook / copy / folder for that purpose. And remember, where material is stored electronically, it is very important that a back-up copy is made. Students storing materials on a home computer, for example, save a back up copy on a portable USB Flash drive / memory stick in case the original material is unintentionally lost / damaged.

One reputable way of citing references is by using the Harvard method. This involves citing the author's surname and date of publication, followed by page reference (see citations above). Students will notice different approaches to this by looking through some reference sections at the end of many books. One way of approaching a bibliography is as follows:

- Author's surname, followed by forename or initials
- Date of publication
- Title (underlined or italics) and which edition, if appropriate
- Place of publication
- Name of publisher

For example: May, Tim (2001) *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process*, 3rd edn. Buckingham: Open University Press. Different ways of punctuating this may be applied. For example, I have included a full stop after '3rd edn.' An alternative would be to leave a space or to use a comma. However, be consistent. Whichever approach is taken should be applied to all references. Note that the SEC does not currently prescribe any particular approach to referencing. This allows a level of flexibility for students.

If referencing from a journal article, the following order could apply:

- Title of the article (may be in inverted commas)
- Title of the journal from which the article is derived
- The volume number of the journal, the issue and page numbers

If referencing from an online source the following order could be used:

- Name of author
- Title of article
- [Online] in square brackets
- Journal information (journal title underlined / italicized)
- Date of article
- Available from: or retrieved from:...name of service, URL of web site and date it was accessed. The URL (universal resource locator) is the unique address of the server on which the document is stored.

Again, remember that the SEC does not currently issue any specific referencing requirements in this regard. However, it might be an idea to consider the information here as 'good / standard practice' and may prove useful for those who wish to engage in study / research at a later stage.

Searching for relevant information on the internet

Where possible, seek out appropriate advice e.g. local librarian. Search engines try to locate material from many databases that is relevant to the keyword / phrase entered in the search. <http://www.google.com> or <http://google.ie> is just one popular choice of search engine. More advanced material may be accessed by using the more academic search engine, Google Scholar, <http://scholar.google.com>

Bell, 2005, p84 offers some useful advice on refining your search. An asterick placed in the middle of a word will deal with different spellings, such as col*r, which will find 'color' and 'colour'. Keywords need too be precise. If you are searching an American database, 'colour' may not be recognised. If the asterick is placed at the end of a word, as in CHILD*, then 'child', 'children' and 'childhood' will be found.

Critically examining evidence

Encourage students to consider the worth of the research they have identified. A class discussion on this might proved useful. Brendan Duffy points out that 'writers will rarely declare their assumptions so it is the task of the researcher to expose them if possible. Ask yourself whether there are signs of bias and partisanship?...Does the evidence supplied convincingly support the author's arguments?' (see Bell, 2005, p89). It is sometimes easy for a student to agree with an author's conclusions, but it is important to ask to what extent these conclusions are justified.

Katie Horne and her colleagues offer a Top Ten Guide to Searching the Internet. What follows is a summary of the key points:

1. Give yourself plenty of time...and set yourself a time limit. Web searching can be addictive – it is important to know where to draw the line!
2. Be optimistic! Begin by tying in exactly what you are looking for.
3. Be prepared with search limiters e.g. other search terms that could be used
4. Know your search engines – try a variety e.g. Google and Yahoo and others

5. When you find something don't lose it! Write down the exact URL of the page you have found. Save useful web pages to consult off line.
6. Don't underestimate the news. Sites such as the Guardian and BBC have dedicated education & other specialist sections. These may offer current up-to-date materials and link to other relevant organisations.
7. Avoid spam. If you register onto various websites you may be entered onto various email lists and will receive unwanted spam emails. You could set up an email address specifically for conducting your research – this means that unwanted spam will be sent there instead of your regular email address.
8. Networking – the old-fashioned type. Talk to your contacts.
9. Referencing. When you cut and paste information paste the web-link also. Internet content is transient, so it is worthwhile recording the exact time and date on which you accessed the information.
10. Patience and persistence!
See Horne, K. (2004) 'Top ten guide to searching the Internet'. Personal communication.
Cited in Bell, 2005, pp 90-92

Some search engines:

<http://google.com> or <http://google.ie> or <http://www.scholar.google.com>
<http://search.yahoo.com>
<http://altavista.com>
<http://metacrawler.com>

Remember that research is not just about finding information, downloading and printing it. Encourage students to find relevant information and to do something with it. It will need to be analysed, critically examined, verified, checked for bias, perspectives etc. It's probably a good idea to follow a simple process once relevant material has been sourced: read, reflect, write. Following this process may facilitate the processing of questioning, critical analysis etc. When this process is genuinely engaged in, and when this is shared and enhanced through class discussion, the level of learning is allowed to deepen. It means that ideas can be explored, opened up. One student's observation can give rise to a number of questions or insights for other students. One argument when critiqued can result in a useful counter-argument. A collaborative approach to this type of exercise is useful, rather than a narrowly competitive approach to learning.

Some of the information in this document is based on the work of **Judith Bell (2005) 'Doing your Research Project', (4th edn.), Berkshire: Open University Press**. While much of the content of this book is very useful for those beginning third level research, I have adapted the content in a reasonable way to help teachers who are guiding students of Leaving Certificate Religious Education in the process of engaging with Coursework.

*Lorraine Gillespie
National Support Officer
Religious Education*