Action Research and Evaluation Methods (HRD 667 - Online)

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E. Michael Brady, Ph.D.
Department of Human Resource Development
Bailey Hall 400-B
University of Southern Maine
Gorham, ME. 04038
(207) 780-5312
mbrady@usm.maine.edu

Course Description

   This course provides an overview of the role of action research within organizations and community settings. Primarily a practical and methods-oriented course, a variety of techniques for collecting research data will be explored. These include Nominal Group, the Delphi Technique, Critical Incident, focus groups, surveys, interviews, and participant observation. Students will conduct an empirical study and write a research report for a collaborating organization.

Key Questions Underlying the Content of this Course

1. What is an "Institutional Review Board" and why is it important?
2. How is "action research" both similar to and different from others kinds of research?
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the commonly employed techniques of collecting research data?
4. Why would a principal investigator choose a multi-method data collection design and what are the challenges of doing so?
5. How does a researcher write a final report that makes sense and makes a difference?

Reading

   It is important to say up front that this is not primarily a reading course. It is a "doing" course. The key experience at the center of HRD 67 is not reading about research, but rather designing and engaging it first-hand. However, reading is an important way to expand methodological horizons and otherwise think about and inform what we are doing.

   That said, the reading requirements for HRD 667 has three parts. (1) A core text that everyone reads (2) a second book of your own choosing (3) briefer readings, mostly consisting of book chapters, articles, and handout materials Mike will prepare and distribute via USM Library E-Reserves, "Course Documents," and otherwise.

(1) As communicated in the advance-organizer letter, the core reading is Rossman, G.B. and Rallis, S.F. (2004). *Learning in the field (Second Edition).* Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage Publications. You will have most of the semester to obtain and read this book. It will be discussed online in early April. However, with much of your energy and attention being spent on your field-based project, prudence suggests that you do not wait until April to read *Learning in the field*.

(2) You will select <u>one</u> additional book to read either from the recommended list below or elsewhere. It is recommended that this second text be one that focuses on the primary data collection method you will be using in your research project (e.g., paper and pencil survey, telephone interview, focus groups, face-to-face interview, etc.) In addition to reading and using it as part of your research project you will be asked to write and post a brief review of this book on "Blackboard" later in the course. In this way we can all learn from each other's choices of books. (Note: Specific guidelines for the book review will be communicated later in the course.)

Almost any library will have books dedicated to research, both general treatises and more focused volumes dedicated to specific research methods. Below is a small list of books that I have read over the years and have found to be useful. Feel free to select your one elective book from within or outside of this list. The idea here is to obtain a useful resource <u>for your research project</u>. In the case where your project may involve the use of Nominal Group Technique, Critical Incident Technique, Delphi, or some other data collection technique(s) on which an entire book may not be readily available (although selected chapters or articles will be), feel free to select a book within the wider literature of research according to your own interests. While most of the books listed here focus on a specific research technique, as may be ascertained from its title, several are more general in nature although they also include chapters with solid and useful methodological dimensions. I have marked these more general texts with a (G) at the end of the reference.

Bourque, L. and Fielder, E. (1995). *How to conduct self-administered and mail surveys.* Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage Publications.

Ely, M., Anzul, M., Friedman, T., Garner, D., and Steinmetz, A. (1991). *Doing qualitative research: Circles within circles.* London: Falmer Press.

Eisner, E. (1991). *The enlightened eye.* New York: Macmillan. (G – This book, while acclaimed and in some ways even "famous," has fewer specifically methodological dimensions than the others in this list of references.)

Fink, R. (1995). *The survey handbook.* Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage Publications.

Krueger, R. and Casey, M.A. (2000). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research (3r^d edition).* Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage Publications

Patton, M.Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Sage.

Salant, P., and Dillman, D. (1994). *How to conduct your own survey*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Stewart, C. and Cash, W. (1985). *Interviewing: Principles and practices (4th edition).* Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown.

Stringer, E. (2004). *Action research in education.* N.J.: Merrill-Prentice Hall. (G)

Stringer, E. (2007). *Action research (3rd Edition).* Thousand Oaks, Sage. (G)

Sudman, S. and Bradburn, N. (1982). *Asking questions: A practical guide to questionnaire design.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Weiss, R. (1994). *Learning from strangers: The art and method of qualitative interview studies.* New York: The Free Press.

(3) Most weeks brief readings, including chapters and handout materials prepared by Mike, will be posted online either in the "Course Documents" folder in "Blackboard" or via the USM Library E-Reserves. To access the library reserves, please follow these steps:

* Go to the USM library website: http://library.usm.maine.edu
* Click on the tab "E-Reserves"
* Click on arrow to "Electronic Reserves and Reserves Pages"
* Type in course number - HRD 667 – and click on "Search"
* (on left) Click on USM-HRD667
* Enter the password: BRAHRD667
* Click on the "Accept" Button

The Action Research Project

Each member of this course will design and conduct one action research project. Historically the best kinds of research projects for HRD 667 have been organizational needs assessments and program evaluations. Other projects may be proposed, however, if there are compelling reasons for doing so.

The project will be carried out in four phases during the course of the semester. The following denote these phases with accompanying due dates:

A. Human Participants Protection Tutorial

Each participant will complete the "Human Participation Protection Education for Research Teams: Computer-based primer." This tutorial was designed and is implemented by the National Institutes of Health. It is located at: http://cme.cancer.gov/clinicaltrials/learning/humanparticipants-protections.asp (You may also get to this tutorial by way of USM's Office of Research Compliance/Institutional Review Board web site.).   Successful completion of the course will result in being awarded a "Completion Certificate" that will be required as part of phase C of the project. Audience: Mike and (eventually) USM's Institutional Review Board.
Due date: January 31, 2008

B. Initial Project Proposal

Each of you will serve as "Principal Investigator" of an action research project. Early in the course you will need to prepare a written statement of the general parameters of your project. This will include a description of the organization or program in which your study will be situated, a preliminary list of research questions, and early thoughts about research method(s) to be employed. Audience: Mike and collaborating agency   (Note: with feedback you receive both from Mike and the collaborating agency changes might be made between phases B and C.)
Due date: February 14, 2008

C. Project Design/IRB Proposal Form

Every study involving human subjects that originates from a faculty member or student at USM needs to undergo a review process by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The review process is based on a written proposal that conforms to the IRB's guidelines. This proposal will articulate your research questions, sampling method, strategies for collecting data, and informed consent procedure (if required). Audience: Mike and IRB (Important note: No data may be collected until approval is granted by the IRB. And once a project has been approved no changes in the research protocol may take place that are not first cleared by the IRB.)
Due date: March 6, 2008

D. **Final Action Research Project Report**

The final product for this course will be a written action research project report. The report will describe what has been done and what conclusions and recommendations have been made to the sponsoring/collaborating organization. Principal investigators will also provide a detailed online briefing of their projects at the end of the course. (Audience for written report are Mike and the collaborating agency; audience for online briefing is the entire HRD 667 class.)
Due date: May 1, 2008

Note: Specific criteria for preparing each of these project steps will be discussed in detail at appropriate times during the course.

Grading Policy

30 % of the final grade earned in this course will be determined by the quality of the project design (see "C" above) and 40% by the final written project report (D above). The remaining 30% will be determined by the substance and overall contribution you make to online discussions through the duration of HRD 667.

Effective Online Participation

Please allow me to change to first-person here. It is my understanding that in recent years, with the burgeoning of online course offerings, a number of USM faculty have developed elaborate rubrics for evaluating online participation. These include detailed standards for superior, average, and below-average work. Thus far I have resisted such a highly structured procedure although, after now having taught four times online, I have a good sense of what works well and what does not with online participation.

I recommend that we all try to abide by the following principles:

- Two or three well-written and meaningful postings per person per week is the goal. With each course unit beginning on Thursday it is helpful to hear from everyone at least once by Sunday and then once or twice before we "turn the page" to a new unit the next Thursday. What is undesirable is to remain silent for six days and then deluge the discussion board with copious comments at the end of the unit. What is unacceptable is to remain silent throughout the entire week-long unit.

- Thoughtful, parsimonious postings are best. Online education is a lot of work for all involved because we all have to read everyone's postings. Run-on, vague, and inappropriately long statements waste everyone's time. While it is impossible to set and stick to a specific parameter, 75 – 100 word postings usually work well. (Note: This isn't a lot. This single bullet you are currently reading consists of 68 words!)

- In online education reading is the way we "listen" to each other. Make comments that build on what others have said and whenever possible demonstrate that you have truly listened to your colleagues.

Accommodations

If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, please make an appointment with Mike as soon as possible. At any point in the semester if you encounter difficulty with the course or feel you could be performing at a higher level, consult with Mike. Students experience difficulty in courses for a variety of reasons. For problems with writing skills or time management, make an appointment to see a student tutor at the Learning Center, Luther Bonney Hall, 2nd floor (780-4228). Help is also available through the Counseling Center, 106 Payson Smith (780-4050) and the Office of Academic Support for Students with Disabilities, Luther Bonney Hall, 2nd floor (780-4706).

Class Schedule

Note: Each week will begin on Thursday and end on Wednesday. In addition to online discussions and the time you will spend with your own field-based work and action research project, most weeks will involve a modest amount of reading posted on USM's Library Reserve and/or perusal of "hand-out" materials prepared by Mike. These briefer readings will be announced at least one week in advance. Deadlines for all <u>major assignments</u> are specified in bold font below.

January 17   Participant introductions
                     Review syllabus and discuss goals and expectations of the course

January 24   USM's Institutional Review Board – Policies and Protocols
                     The Nominal Group Technique as a research tool

January 31   Defining, understanding, and appreciating action research
                     Discussion of your early thoughts about a research project (Note:
                        each of you will have a forum in which to post your ideas.)
                     NIH Tutorial "Completion Certificate" due

February 7   Needs assessment and forecasting method: Delphi Technique

February 14   Needs assessment and evaluation method: Critical Incident
                     Initial project proposal due

February 21   Winter vacation - no class

February 28   Posting of action research proposals with discussion and feedback

March 6   Survey research – design and sampling
                     Project Design / IRB proposal form due

March 13   Survey research - question development and data collection

March 20   Focus Groups (Note: We may choose to use software entitled
                      "Elluminate" during this unit. We shall discuss this matter as
                      a class prior to the week of March 20th.)

March 27   Spring vacation - no class

April 3   No online discussion - Mike is away at a conference. Please work
                      on your project.

April 10   Introduction to qualitative research; discussion of *Learning in the Field*
                Have completed *Learning in the Field* by Rossman and Rallis in order
                to be able to participate in this week's online discussion.

April 17   Qualitative research (continued)

April 24   Post reviews of individually selected book with discussion
                Write and post a review of the book you have individually selected

May 1   Principal Investigator reports and discussion of projects
                Final Action Research Report Due