



USE OF QUESTIONS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: HOW QUESTIONS GUIDED OUR STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Questions form a basis of any research project, underscoring the significance of teaching students how to use questions in various parts of research. Our involvement in supervising students conducting research projects and undertaking our own, have shown the need to use questions as a guide. This prompted us to share our experience on the use of questions to direct 'the conduct' and 'writing' of a research report using qualitative research tradition of inquiry. Questions were used to determine the topic for the study, select relevant literature to review and research design. We employed a qualitative study, comprising questions that demanded complex answers. Robust questions were used to clarify the focus of the study. Research questions are instrumental in writing a research report; they help in ensuring that findings reflect the data sought; confirm discussions; direct conclusions drawn; and are indicative of what the study is all about.

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INTRODUCTION

Focusing on asking right questions help to produce a comprehensive research report. In this article, we have shown how to use questions with a view of developing research skills in students undertaking research studies. Since research is an important component of any education undertaking, it is only necessary to sharpen students' research skills and correct their use of questions. A research question is an inquiry into an issue of interest and directs a study. In our attempt to show the role of questions in conducting a study and writing a research report, we have made reference to various parts of a research (proposal and or report). Key among them include: topic, research questions, statement of the problem, purpose, rationale, literature review, methodology, findings, discussions, conclusions, discussions and recommendations. They are crucial components of a research study which need attention. In each part, we have indicated right questions to ask with illustrations where necessary by referring to a study we once undertook.

Topic of the study

Research questions must conform to the requirements of the topic.

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They reflect what is supposed to be investigated as well as how it should be done. The topic depicts the outcome and it is reflected in the title of the study. The topic is the subject matter which spells out the inherent problem of the study from which research questions emanate. Brymam (2007) explains topic as a 'research problem or statement about an area of concern, condition to be improved upon, a difficulty to be eliminated, or troubling question that exists in scholarly literature, in theory, or in practice that points to the need for meaningful understanding and deliberate investigation'. The topic requires thorough examination which is achieved by asking relevant questions. It forms a basis for all other questions pertaining to the study. That is why research questions relate to the topic because they are developed from the theoretical construct which depicts the focus of the study. Our theoretical construct was: 'Distance students and 'school experience'. This theoretical construct reflected the phenomenon we studied in detail. We focused our topic by making it interesting and relevant to the study area concerned. Simon (2011) indicates that qualitative research questions should not only be feasible, but also include suitable standard and description. We considered if the topic chosen was researchable by taking into account its feasibility in terms of availability of resources. We narrowed the topic to make it manageable by asking ourselves the following questions:

- What do we want to write about?
- How can we come up with a focused topic?
- What is the central theme of our topic?

The research questions facilitated understanding the context being studied for a specific group of people who happened to be students engaged in distance learning programmes at Zambian Open University, Nkrumah and University of Africa. The questions emanating from the topic specify the context of the study. Maxwell (2007) explains that research questions state accurately the intention of the study. Thus the topic of our study was: 'School Experience' of Students Engaged in Open and Distance Learning in Selected Higher Institutions of Learning in Zambia.

Statement of the problem

This spells out critical aspects of the problem. Questions such as the following can help focus the study:

- What is the problem?
- What are the critical aspects of the problem?
- How is it affecting the community?

Research questions

We used a qualitative tradition of inquiry to conduct our study. This was because we set out to get meaning of people's lived experiences through the inquiry process. Application of research questions enabled us to probe into areas we did not initially anticipate. Agee (2009) explains that qualitative research gives rise to a reflective and interrogative process which occurs throughout resulting into gaining more insights into the lives of the people being studied. Richards (2005:15) lists three questions to ask in developing research questions:

- What are you asking?
- How are you asking it?
- What data will you need to provide a good answer?

The first question prompted us to analyze the topic so that we could set appropriate questions. We began by identifying the main theme contained in our topic on which subsequent questions were based. Thereafter, we set theoretical questions which gave rise to practical question areas as the study progressed. We derived theoretical questions from theories that demonstrate issues related to 'school experience'. From ideas sought, we set questions which guided us to search for required data. We used these questions to determine contents of instruments used for data collection. As the search for data progressed, we included other questions to enable us probe further and clarify issues that arose from initial answers given. This is typical of a qualitative research because other questions emanate from interactive process. Creswell (2007) sees qualitative research questions as 'evolving'. They develop from initial questions set and are crucial in focusing the study. We made use of research questions to identify areas that needed to be examined. We used what Agee (2009) termed as researchable questions because they conformed to available instruments applicable to our study. Each question focused on certain aspects which helped us to attain a comprehensive understanding of events as people perceived them. Agee (2009) substantiates the need for using more than one question in a lone study.

Research questions are meant to seek answers in specified areas of study within given resources. The questions specifies data required to provide answers sought. Good qualitative research questions inquire about the events, their meaning and how it is perceived. In our study, questions served as tools for discovery, clarifying issues sought and focus the study (Agee, 2009). A research question summarizes the significant issues to be examined and help to identify phenomenon to be studied. Such questions arouse curiosity and indicate the need for further inquiry on issues. They help in identifying the gap for further inquiry.

We chose to use what is referred to as a surprising approach to formulating research questions to enable us get insights into the perspectives on 'school experience'. Thus the surprising questions included the following:

- How do students engaged in ODL perceive their 'school experience'?
- What facts affect their 'school experience'?

We ensured that our research questions were robust to enable us gain more insights into the students' lived experiences. In this way, by using surprising questioning technique, we managed to get surprising and complex answers from the research questions asked. We probed the participants to allow them explain their situation as regards persistence of illiteracy in the communities studied. Simon (2011) explains characteristics of qualitative research questions as being open and probative, as well as indicative of the study's intent.

Purpose of the study

In our study, the purpose of the study was reflective of the contents of the research questions. Instead of indicating the main question, the purpose sufficed. We showed the intention of the study which in turn determined the choice of the research design in terms of the applicability of methods and techniques required for conducting it. From the purpose of the study, we formulated questions which specified areas of concentration. These included questions on individual school experience, school administrative and interaction with members of staff and pupils that had a bearing on teaching and learning process. During data collection process, we included other questions because the initial ones seemed to be too limited to explore the phenomenon of school experiences studied. We noticed that other questions stemmed from discussions and observations carried out. In this case, the first questions only served as a guide to the others which were directed by the events as they unfolded during the inquiry process. Depending on how participants responded to the questions, we asked follow-up questions which we found to be unique to certain individuals. Using these focused questions enabled us to explore various perspectives on the students' experience which revealed connections of causal factors underlying cited challenged they faced. In qualitative research, follow-up questions can be context specific depending on the way people experience the phenomenon sought. Agee (2009) explained that in qualitative research, questions should be open to discovery of issues during interviews and focus group discussions meaning that they can flow from one another giving rise to others in due course. In our interview guides, we prepared some questions from which other questions evolved as the discussions progressed during interview sessions.

There is always room for inclusion of emergent related issues in qualitative research when questions are used appropriately.

Rationale of the study

We used questions in research to address the rationale of the study by getting insights into what we intended to achieve; meaning of the findings as regards the phenomenon studied and students' school experience as a discipline; contexts and application beyond. We identified individuals and institutions deemed to benefit from the study by asking questions that touched on why we conducted it. The study has to provide answers to justify it so that benefits accrued from it are extended to specific groups of people. In other words, research questions should lead to identifying specific benefits and beneficiaries from the study.

Literature review

The research questions informs literature sought. We consulted relevant literature on issues inherent in the study. Using specific questions in the study, we gained knowledge of how other authors addressed similar issues. These research questions helped us to be analytical and focus on study areas which required attention. Thus we identified areas with some gaps in which we situated our study. This helped us to have a basis for our study. In this way, research questions clarified the argument of the thesis and guided on type of sources on which to base it. We found research questions as a spring board for venturing into our study as well as a basis on which to argue issues arising by being critical. During literature review, we employed the reflexive process by asking pertinent questions. Doing so, helped us to identify issues on which we could present arguments and take a stand. This is because research question were subjective to allow us choose the side we wanted. We related our questions to some theories in teaching practice and students' experience on inherent models applicable. Maxwell (2005) asserts that research questions justify inclusion of tentative theories concerning phenomena.

METHODOLOGY

We noted that for questions to achieve desirable results, they should be compatible with research paradigm employed. We employed questions that permitted participants to be subjective and this is inherent in the research paradigm. Constructivism allows subjects to create their own experiences of which qualitative tradition of inquiry is part. We were prompted to choose qualitative research design because of the nature of the topic which demanded getting descriptions of lived people's experiences. We included questions that allowed for eliciting diverse views from participants in the study. Qualitative studies reveal how people experience phenomenon and their views on events. This calls for inclusion of suitable questions for eliciting data. In particular, we conducted a phenomenological study. Simon (2011) advises that research questions should be in accord with chosen design. In this case, the following types of research questions were applicable. These included questions which ascertained the kinds of experiences adults attributed to students' school experience. We used research questions to determine the type of data required for our study which also served as a basis for supporting and contradicting position taken. This we did by asking ourselves these questions:

- What type of data do we need to get concerning students' school experience?
- What type of data can explain perceived situation of student teachers doing their teaching practice?
- How will these data provide answers to research questions?

The type of data required directed us to choose methods and techniques that were qualitative in nature. Because we needed to get people's perspectives, we decided to use interviews and focus group discussions. These techniques involved use of questions that allowed research participants to provide details about how student experienced their teaching practice. This was made possible by deriving sub questions from the main ones which lead to eliciting more details on specific areas of the study. Agee (2009) explains that questions are arrived at by focusing them through an iterative and reflective process which helps to gain insights into specific data required for the study.

At the same time, contents of the instruments reflected research questions used. Doing so guided in eliciting data befitting the topic of the study. As a qualitative research, we used questions to derive meaning from lived experiences of the participants. We explored circumstances of illiterates, explained perceived events and described them. Marshall and Rossman (2006) categorised the research questions as meaning, exploratory, explanatory and descriptive. We used the exploratory questions to enable us venture into understanding how adults experienced causal factors of perpetuation of illiteracy. Thereafter we sought the meaning the participants attached to their experiences. Doing so enabled us to gain insights into the experiences of students sought.

These questions led us to devise ways of eliciting data from research participants. By considering the type of the data that answered the research questions, we chose to use appropriate data collection methods and techniques which included interviews, focus group discussions and observation. Research questions determined the type of tools that we adopted to collect the required data. Thus the direction and scope of the study determine the effectiveness of the study, data collection and acceptability of inherent meaning.

RESULTS

Research questions were instrumental in data collection for the study. We were guided by the questions to gain insights into people's experiences. We used qualitative research questions which were intended to answer how the students perceived their teaching practice. Flick (2006) notes that questions make known how people experience phenomenon. Developing research questions is a reflective process. We thought about the effect of the questions on the participants in terms of whether they touched on sensitive issues or not. We asked the questions and considered reactions of the participants to see whether to continue probing or not. Agee (2009) advises considering influence of research questions on relation of the researcher with participants especially when it involves vulnerable and marginalized groups. The researcher has to also consider how the question can affect the participants as well as how the questions will position him or her in relation to the participants. Feelings of participants in the study are critical because they determine the findings. We thought about the

situation the participants were in when they responded to the questions asked. Some of them felt free to talk about their experiences and factors while others did not, depending on the situation they were in at the time of the interview. We noted that some people felt free to talk about certain issues while in groups while other did not. What is more is that through the reflexive process, we decided to isolate the participants and asked them to respond to some of the question individually. The participants were affected differently by the questions asked. It is important for researchers to think about the participants' reactions in terms of how they affect the eliciting of data. Participants are co-producers of the data sought and as such they need to be respected by considering their feelings. Subedi (2007:67) advises researchers to comprehend cultural differences and define 'learning encounters which have redrawn the map of research methodology. For this reason, researchers need to develop research questions that should serve as 'reflexive and dialogical tools'. This means that participants should be involved in the research process as equal partners in generating knowledge sought.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

When discussing the findings of the study, we reflected on the questions which could help us not lose sight of important points. We asked ourselves about what the findings meant. Questions such as:

- What do the findings tell us?
- How do these findings correlate?
- What are the implications of these findings to people concerned and the outside world?

Such questions focused our discussions of the findings. The conclusions evoked questions which touched on reflecting on whether or not the stated objectives were realized or not.

- What were the objectives for the study?
- To what extent have they been realized?
- What do the revelations point out?

Such questions helped to make conclusions based on the study done.

Recommendation

This demanded answering questions related to what should be done to correct the situation. We looked at questions such as these:

- What corrective measures need to be taken into consideration?
 - Who is responsible for taking these corrective actions?
- Answers to these questions shaped the recommendations we made by specifying required actions and actors.

Positioning research questions

In our research report, we placed the research questions in three chapters. We included them in the introduction, findings and concluding parts.

In the introductory part, we presented the theoretical framework, statement of the problem, purpose, objectives and then the questions thereafter. The other parts of the introduction that were presented earlier served as a basis that informed the contents of the research questions. These parts directed the nature of the questions required for the study because they indicated as Maxwell (2005:69) clarifies 'what I wanted to learn' and answered. We restated the questions in the findings to show how well they were answered. Finally, the concluding chapter also reflected the questions to indicate how the analysis addressed them. Other than, specifying the positions of research questions in the report, it is suffice to mention here that the whole research process was full of questions which directed the study.

Conclusion

Conducting a qualitative research is an interactive process which is guided by questions. It is for this reason that education research teaching should ensure that students understand how to use questions to facilitate the study undertaken. Using questions is one way of sharpening research skills. The students have to be enlightened on how best to use questions in their journey as they conduct the study. The students embarking on research study need to develop a questioning mind to enable them remain focused throughout. We have demonstrated how we conducted our study by using questions to focus the study. This is important for researchers to sharpen their critical thinking skills in education research and development.

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