

PREST Review

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July 2005

Approximately 1650 words

Introduction: Subject, Scope and Type

With the continuing interest and investment in e-learning and other forms of distance education, comes increased interest in research as a means to direct innovation and determine cost and learning effectiveness. However, conducting (and evaluating) quality research requires a set of skills that are not always available to distance education institutions, nor individual practitioners. To meet this need the Commonwealth of Learning has published the Practitioner Research and Evaluation Skills Training (PREST) series of print-based materials (PDF files) designed to help Open and Distance Learning (ODL) practitioners plan and conduct “principled and systematic” research and evaluation.

The PREST materials were developed in collaboration with the International Research Foundation for Open Learning (IRFOL) and downloadable for free (for individual use) from the web at <http://www.col.org/prest>. Copyright to the series is maintained by COL, but they note interest in allowing users to reprint and bind the contents for non commercial use. Unfortunately, COL has not used one of the Creative Commons licenses for distribution that could have clarified the copyright issue.

The series design is based on the development (by the reader) of a locally relevant research project. Each of the core modules (Planning, gathering data, analyzing, reporting etc) is presented in a way that assists the reader to apply the new information to their own context. The authors of the PREST modules are ODL practitioners and practicing researchers, and the editorial advisory board reads like a Who’s Who of distance education research and scholarship. Although designed specifically for ODL practitioners, the PREST materials could easily be applied outside of the ODL context by researchers from other domains looking to develop their research and evaluation skills.

Content Summary

The PREST foundation course consists of two sets of learning materials, 6 modules in each set. The core modules in the first set provide a foundation in research and evaluation methods and design. The module titles are:

- A1 Doing Educational Research and Evaluation in ODL
- A2 Planning Research and Evaluation
- A3 Getting and Analysing Quantitative Data
- A4 Getting and Analysing Qualitative Data
- A5 Mixed Research Methods

A6 Reporting on Research to Support or Influence Change

Each module is supported by resource materials that also can be downloaded from the COL website. These materials consist of journal articles, book chapters and some excel spreadsheets (for analyzing quantitative data module). Unfortunately, many of these materials are copyright to the authors or their publishers, complicating the re-use issue.

The second set of materials consists of six handbooks, each focused on research and evaluation in a specific field of ODL. These are:

B1 Using programme monitoring in research and evaluation

B2 Measuring outcomes

B3 Cost and economics of open and distance learning

B4 Programme evaluation and its role in quality assurance

B5 Researching marginalised and disadvantaged learners

B6 Researching tutoring and learning support

There is also a very helpful user guide that provides background and time expectations as well as suggestions for normal and customized use.

Module & Unit Structure

Each module is divided into a number of study units and each unit tends to be made up of the following components: i) an overview of the unit including its focus and learning outcomes; ii) one or more activities; iii) unit summary; iv) feedback to the activities, and v) resources. The units are 'action' units – motivating the user to actively create a relevant research project.

Study Time

The study time suggested for each unit is generally a minimum of 20 hours per module. Detailed timing guides are given at the start of each module but the actual time it will take someone depends, of course, on his or her individual learning pace and the attention given to assigned projects and activities. In total, time commitment for the core modules course is estimated at 140 hours with an additional 120 hours estimated for the specialized handbook series.

So What Are The Materials Like?

Overall we found the PREST course to be interesting, memorable, and instructive. The modules address the key issues related to research and evaluation in ODL. For example, how to identify research questions, write a research proposal and design interview schedules are a few of the questions addressed.

We appreciated the non dogmatic way that the authors seek to expand the alternatives available to the ODL practitioner in relation to research and evaluation. For example, they highlight the use of photographs as a research method. Though photo use for documenting projects is not new, it tends not to be widely used in research today.

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The learning materials also cover the standard methodological issues such as validity, reliability, bias, relevance, sample and causality. They also take into account the critical contextual issues such as social, political and environmental factors that influence the research project.

The materials attempt to simplify large research topics so that they can be easily understood and applied in a large variety of applications. For example, the ‘analyzing quantitative data’ module shows how to use some basic analytical tools in Microsoft Excel rather than having to learn statistical software tool, and the ‘reporting’ module addresses how to insure research findings are widely disseminated and promising innovations adopted.

The modules are methodologically neutral - providing instruction and best practice examples for both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The PREST approach does recommend the now standard advice of using multiple methods of research wherever possible but does not really suggest new and innovative ways of developing an appropriate methodology that thinks outside of the box of quantitative and qualitative data methods. In particular, we would suggest a discussion of critical research methods and a module on the increasingly popular design-based research methodology that was developed specifically for education application.

The course provides useful examples of the ways that different forms of research and evaluation is used in distance education. In particular, they provide ‘pen portraits’ in the first module (A1) of seven imaginary researchers, in different contexts, that illustrate the range of practical-based research in ODL. These mythical researchers are referred to throughout the course providing a personalized context. The reader can hopefully identify with at least one of these researchers to help the learner apply their comments and concerns to the learners’ own situation.

Interactive Materials

The materials use a variety of learning methods and activities such as case studies, applying the unit to the reader’s own context, reading exercises and study tips that make the course both interesting and accessible. The interactive materials aim to develop practical skills through doing authentic research tasks that draw on established research and evaluation methods and theory. These practical exercises draw the learner into actually doing rather than just thinking about research practice.

The authors provide feedback related to the various activities allowing for individual completion. This feedback follows the well known ‘guided conversation’ model allowing the user to engage in a form of simulated dialogue with the author.

Writing Style

The learning materials are clearly written, comprehensive, and self-contained. The readings are all provided (again in PDF format), and the resources and references are clearly identified. There is a good balance between theory and practice presented and key

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concepts and often confusing terms such as positivism, paradigm and epistemology are clearly explained. Although the authors point out that the course is about research and not ODL design, the course is good example of effective print-based ODL. Thus, the reader can learn general ODL principles through engagement with the course.

Limitations

We feel that the main limitation is that the PREST series does not really provide busy practitioners with convenient enough access to the basic knowledge and techniques necessary to conduct research and evaluation in their everyday work. There is a very large amount of material (hundreds of pages) for someone to read through in order to find what they might need. The PDF format does not lend itself to easy search across modules and there is no index. Further work at chunking and tagging the modules as re-useable learning objects will allow the resources to be more conveniently searched and repurposed for specific contexts. Finally the modules suffer the fate of all print based materials. They do not support hyperlinking, interactive quizzes, web search enhancement, learner feedback, real or asynchronous discussions or on the fly updates. Additional web based resources such as interview schedules, survey schedules and observation schedules could also be provided and updated with suggestion from users in web based versions.

The study guides suggests ways in which online or face-to-face groups could use the materials in addition to its primary role as a self study course. We hope that COL and others involved in practitioner professional development will capitalize on these adaptations to create social environments for researchers to collaborate and share both their learning and their research results. One can imagine a vibrant online community (based on social software?) that supports, encourages and documents the application of this material in the real work of practicing distance educators.

Conclusion

If an ODL practitioner is serious about and committed to doing research then these modules are a must-read resource. Especially those with limited research experience or training will find the content both appropriate and structured for effective learning. The course is written for ODL practitioners by ODL practitioners and will be a very useful tool in developing research relevant to and effective in a particular circumstance at a particular time. The modules will likely morph into new forms and benefit from various media and communication enhancement, but even in their current form they are an invaluable resource. The COL, IRFOL and the individual authors and editors are to be congratulated and thanked for their significant contribution.