

## **‘Not just another survey’: Perspectives on researching the changing nature of work and lifelong learning**

Stephen Billett, Griffith University, Australia

(Extract)

Reflecting on researchers’ work and learning through their participation in a large, multi-part and long-term research project seems particularly apt when that project focuses on work and learning. Hence, this chapter seeks to provide such a reflection, albeit from the perspective of a researcher with his own preferences for conducting inquiry and conceptions of work and learning through work, and who had particular kinds of engagement with that project. This engagement was across the entire project: from early meetings about its proposal, the process of assessment and then through participation across its enactment, most notably through attending the annual meetings, as an international advisor. In addition, the author has participated in and led multi-member research teams, and experienced and learnt from some of the complexities of completing projects, on time, with the available funds and to satisfy participants’ needs and meet their aspirations, and also those of sponsors. However, none of those projects have even approximated the scale of the Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL) project, which was extraordinary in terms of its scope, complexity and extent of funding. However, before advancing such a reflection, some acknowledgement is required of issues associated with using different disciplines and methodologies within such a research project. These issues are perhaps most notably those that arise between researchers adopting qualitative and quantitative orientations and procedures. The orthodoxies that underpin these distinct methodologies are long-standing, frequently contested and have been eloquently and extensively debated. Moreover, the disciplines within the social sciences are founded on distinct premises, conceptions and starting points (e.g. the individual or social systems and factors), hence issues of disciplinary orientations can also make problematic the conduct of such a project.

The use of different methods and disciplinary orientations are held to benefit research projects by securing contributions from distinct disciplinary insights. Data and analyses can variously augment, provide greater detail about what has been learnt through surveys for example, or alternatively, identify patterns across populations thereby enriching the findings of small-scale detail qualitative inquiry. In some ways, the use of different methods and procedures is consistent with the concept of triangulation deployed in quantitative enquiry by which different approaches to data gathering and analyses are used to ratify or verify the outcomes of inquiry. That is, triangulation is used to increase the validity of research findings. However, such a premise is easily contested within a project using distinct methodologies and aiming to accommodate disciplinary differences, unless the means of progressing is founded on some agreement of what constitutes valid research processes (Jackson 2005) and outcomes as a starting point, not as a point of difference that arises through the project.