



Doing your Research Project in Sport

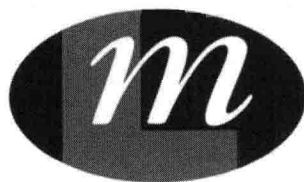
Chris Lynch



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LearningMatters

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To my mom

Acknowledgements

Throughout this book I have emphasised how you should draw upon the resources of those around you – in particular, draw upon human resources to help in any way they can. In writing this book I have done exactly that. I have drawn upon the resources of many people and now that writing is complete I would like to sincerely thank them and acknowledge the help they have given me.

Some need to be thanked for their suggestions on the way the book could be improved. For example, the wisdom of ‘just tell them to do a Google search’ as well as insistence that the wise words of Fabio Capello and Voldemort appear at appropriate places within the text. You know who you are.

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Finally, I have to thank myself, a pat on my back for finally doing it . . . well done Lynchy!

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Part 1

Getting to the
start line

Chapter 1

Your research project and this book

Learning Objectives

This chapter will help you to be able to:

- use this book to make your research project a successful one;
- understand that this book and other resources are there to help you;
- make best use of your time when searching for information in this book.

You will also be able to:

- feel more confident that the research project will be a successful one.

Introduction

Welcome to the world of research in sport and exercise. Welcome also to the beginning of your research project. You should consider your research project a journey: by setting out on that journey you are about to join a community of people who are crucial in developing our understanding of the interesting and vast area that is called sport and exercise. The journey will bring huge gains in knowledge and understanding and will benefit you greatly in all you do from now on. The outcomes of your project may also provide some of the lifeblood on which those engaged in researching these fields depend. It is not a journey that you have to take alone and this book is here to help you as you go on your way.

This may be the first time you have had to carry out a research project, and you may not be very clear about what is involved in undertaking a project from conception to completion. This book is designed to help you understand what is involved in bringing a successful research project to completion and to guide you through the process – so take a deep breath and relax, help is at hand.

I assume that for many reading this book the research project is an integral part of an academic award. Therefore the project is likely to carry significant weight towards that award and it is best to get it right, first time. Using this book will help you in achieving that aim, but it is not the total solution. Research projects tend to follow similar processes and there is generally a common way in which they are structured. However, your awarding institution will have its own requirements and you must make sure that you are completely familiar with these. Your own institution will be the one, after all, who assesses the project. This book can act as a valuable generic resource but you do need to find out from your institution what is required of you in terms of word counts, submission dates, and project proposals, as well as many other aspects.

Wherever and however you are studying, there will be an abundance of help available to you if you look. It is likely you will have a supervisor or tutor specifically to look after you while you do your project. There will be people and resources available to help and advise on some of the trickier bits in carrying out a research project, such as the correct referencing style to use and how to write a report coherently. Research is a collective enterprise and it is likely you will have peers at your institution who are going through, or have already gone through, the same process and who can help. Make sure you make as full use of those resources as you do of this book. Ultimately, however, the success of this research project will depend on you.

How this book is structured to help you

I thought a sporting analogy would be the best way to illustrate how to approach a research project in sport and exercise, and so this book is split into three sections, each with a sporting theme to its title:

- *Getting to the start line;*
- *You're off;*
- *Crossing the finishing line.*

Getting to the start line is all about the preparation you need to do to ensure your project is a successful one. Like all sports people, the performance is only as good as the preparation and so time spent preparing is essential. You will notice that most of the book falls in this section. Through this preparation you will discover how to research your topic area and to develop your question, as well as how to design your method of data collection.

You're off will help you understand and deal with some of the practicalities of a research project. They include, amongst other things, gaining informed consent and considering the ethics of your project, writing the method, and analysis of the data.

Finally, *Crossing the finishing line* is there to help you ensure the finished report or research product is written well and all the relevant parts are brought together smoothly and logically.

Each chapter begins with Learning Objectives, such as those at the beginning of this chapter. They are there to help you understand what the chapter will help you with. Review them as you progress through the chapter to be clear on what you have learned and understood. Once you are fully familiar with the chapter, you can check your knowledge and understanding against them.

This book is specifically designed to help you conduct your research *project*. It is designed as a practical resource to accompany you during your project. Think of it as a 'guide-by-your-side'. As such, this book differs from general research methods texts. Such texts provide a grounding in research methods in general because an education in research methods is educationally valuable in its own right and because modules on research methods are often intended to provide the foundation on which you, when it comes to conducting a *project*, will then build.

Of course, there is some overlap between general research methods texts and this book. It would hardly be possible to write a guide to research projects without saying something about research methods in general. This book, however, does not seek to provide a comprehensive introduction to research methods in sport and exercise. There are other good texts around already that do that (an example of which is

Research Methods in Sport by Mark Smith, also published by Learning Matters). Rather, *this* book focuses on the execution of research in the context of your project. The material provided here on research methods in general, therefore, provides a refresher course, designed to remind you of key points concerning research methods and to direct you to further resources for more comprehensive or detailed treatment.

On many courses, you study a module on research methods well before – perhaps even a year before – embarking on a research project. Think of a book such as Mark's as the one you need for the former, and this one as your companion for the project.

Throughout each chapter there will be plenty of activities, tips, hints and checklists to help with your understanding, as well as guides towards further reading. There will also be real comments from those whose experience you can draw on when carrying out your research project.

It is always good practice to come back from time to time to review different chapters as the research project develops, to help with those little sticking points that undertaking any research project will always throw up. Above all, remember a project is not there to stress you out, it's there to help you learn and understand, and you can make it fun.

Enjoy it – and here's to completing a successful project in sport.

Chapter 2

Getting to the start line: the basis of research

Learning Objectives

This chapter will help you to be able to:

- understand the need for research in sport and exercise;
- see opportunities where you can apply your understanding for the research process to potential projects;
- understand the necessary characteristics of a researcher.

You will also be able to:

- define what research is.

Introduction

You need to read this chapter as it gives an essential overview of the why and how of sport and exercise research to anyone who is about to undertake a research project for the first time. The information you will find here will introduce and underpin the ideas and understanding you need in order to complete a successful research project.

By undertaking a research project, you are about to start to develop research skills and gain a deeper understanding of a given topic or area in sport and exercise. The work you will do in this project will require you to work more independently than before and so understanding some of the skills and characteristics of a researcher is vital. From learning about the skills and characteristics of a researcher you will be able to reflect upon your own skills and characteristics and develop yourself further. You will gather information from various sources, and need to be able to read, interpret and critically evaluate this information in more depth than you may have done previously. A research project is generally considered a culmination of your learning, and it is best to support that learning through understanding the basis of what research is, and what a researcher is.

To understand the process you are about to embark upon, you will need some understanding of what the basis of research is, and the research context of your specific project. The first thing we need to establish is what exactly research is and what need there is for it. So we begin this chapter by examining the need for research, both how that need is driven scientifically and also how it contributes academically to the pursuit of your award.

The chapter then moves on to the basics of research. This begins with an examination of the different purposes of research, before a discussion of the process that research follows. Understanding that process

is vital to help you ensure that your project keeps moving at the pace required. Next, we will look at you as a researcher, and examine the qualities you will need to have or to develop in order to be successful as a researcher.

What exactly is research?

This is a question that is always asked by lecturers and tutors; you may well have already been asked it in a research methods class or lecture. Often the answer is that it is about gathering information, trying to answer questions, finding solutions to problems, or something similar to this. This is true, and it is natural that this is your answer because when you have had to research in the past, to write essays or answer a question, that is probably what you have done. These answers can and should be built upon in order to understand what research in sport and exercise is. When we consider the question what *exactly* research is, we need to consider how we go about researching, the actual processes involved. We also need to think of the definition in the context of a research project, not as an answer to an essay question. We need to add a few more things to make our definition of research more complete.

Whenever we carry out a research project, it is vital that we have a planned system behind our method of gathering information. A planned system ensures we are thorough, collecting everything we think we need to answer the question we have; we need to try to think about every eventuality that can influence our data collection and plan for this too. Considering the level of planning that is needed we could define research as a systematic process of discovery and advancement of human knowledge (Gratton and Jones, 2003, p4).

We could go further than just the planning side when we think of defining research in the context of a research project. There is also the process you go through when collecting information and then reporting it back. We can define research as the planned and systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of data. A definition that tutors and lecturers may welcome is that research is the process of applying creative thinking in a logical way to the acquisition and creation of knowledge informed by theory and practice and informing theory and practice.

The definition we now have for research has progressed a long way from where we started. Read it again, breaking it down into the distinct different parts. You will see research is the process of applying creative thinking in a logical way. A research project can be creative and you can think creatively but also in a logical way. The acquisition and creation of knowledge is essentially what research is all about. You are not only acquiring knowledge, gaining knowledge, but perhaps your research might create some new knowledge that can contribute to that lifeblood of sport and exercise we talked about in Chapter 1.

The knowledge you gain or create should always be informed by both theory and practice. It must have an evidence base that has been correctly applied. Equally the knowledge you gain and create can inform theory and practice. Your research can form part of that evidence base for others to base their theory and practice. Now thinking of research in those terms should get you excited about undertaking your research project.

For inspiration, and to build my confidence, I like to read this quotation from the Nobel Prize-winning scientist Julius Axelrod.

I soon learned that it did not require a great brain to do original research. One must be highly motivated, exercise good judgment, have intelligence, imagination, determination, and a little luck. One of the most important qualities in doing research, I found, was to ask the right questions at the right time.

The need for research

Because you are most probably doing a research project as part of an academic award at an awarding institution, you may be asking yourself why you are required to do a research project at all. How will doing a research project benefit you? The answer to this question is very broad but part of the answer is in the approach a research project requires. It is very different to the academic subjects you have already studied because you will have to work more independently than before. You will also develop a whole range of skills that you may never have used before. Your tutors and lecturers know that innumerable organisations and agencies need personnel that have these skills and the ability to work independently. So whether a student, an employed professional or someone engaged in voluntary work with an organisation, understanding, researching and doing a research project gives vital skills for employment and life. This does not answer the big question though, which is: what need is there for research?

I am a natural consumer of research. This is because I am an academic and so it is important that I am aware of current developments that are discovered through ongoing research. I know that much of the material I use in my teaching is commonly accepted, but it is only accepted because it is knowledge that has enough evidence to back it up. In other words, the concepts and ideas that I teach are grounded in theory and practice. They have been researched thoroughly and the weight of evidence suggests that what I teach is true. That is not to say that this does not change. It does as research gathers more evidence, new ideas can and do develop, existing ideas are challenged.

As a tutor I often get inquisitive students who ask the most thought-provoking and sometimes awkward questions, and very occasionally I cannot answer them! (This happens *very* occasionally, I might add.) As an educator it just would not do to say *I don't know*; it is better to say, *if I don't know, I am going to find out and so should you, so we can chat about it next week*. I say this because it is likely that the question they ask has been researched in some way and some evidence exists that could answer the question, at least in part. If, after looking thoroughly, no evidence seems to exist, then the question that has been asked is worthy of research and could be a worthwhile research project.

Learning Activity 2.1

Having questions in your mind is the best way to initiate your own research question for your project. It is this simple starting point of enquiry that can sow the seed from which a research project can develop.

- Do you have questions about topics already? Can you think of more?

Write them down, perhaps in a journal or research notebook and see if they can be developed further. It is good practice to record ideas; even if they are not used right now, who knows what the future may bring? One of these questions could be the starting point for your research project.

Of course, one of the great things about working in a community of researchers is that other researchers will not take the research you present as being fact: they will explore it themselves and approach it with a critical eye. Why is this a great thing to do, you ask? It is great because the evidence generated needs to be confirmed as being correct. Good research should always be repeatable. Even now, as I read research articles and books I find challenges to commonly accepted ideas. As a researcher this is very comforting, because it is vital that through research we still challenge existing ideas as well as generating new knowledge. The result is that our knowledge and development will continue to grow on a grounded evidence base. For your research project, you may consider carrying out research that examines an existing idea or concept instead of looking for something not already researched. In research having a critical eye on what has been found in the past is as important as having an inquisitive and curious thought about the present and future. There is a definite need for research, if we are to feel confident about the things we assume to be true.

Of course, existing research is an essential resource for your own research project. Chapters 3 and 4 look at how to search and use the literature to develop a question, but what we should be asking at this stage is, what have other studies found about topics you are interested in? It is important to know what the current state of knowledge is. Try and look at as much recent research around topics of interest to you as possible. You are using research to establish whether you are about to research something which has been studied extensively before, or whether you are finding a gap in the existing knowledge. If you are about to research something that has already been extensively studied, what are you adding to this? Are you trying to disprove existing theory? If so, where does your evidence come from that this may be likely? If you have found a gap in the knowledge, why have other researchers not spotted this before? Is it a topic worthy of research?

With all these questions, it is important to remember that if you are undertaking a research project for the first time, the tutors and lecturers are more likely to judge your success not on whether you are finding startling new evidence about an existing area or identifying a gap in existing knowledge but more on how you have approached and have gone through the processes of research. This book is about the process. It is not a research methods book but a practical guide.

The purpose of research

All research should be carried out with a specific purpose in mind and this purpose will influence how the research project is approached in its design. The purpose of research can be:

- exploratory;
- speculative;
- descriptive;
- explanatory;
- predictive; and/or
- evaluative.

Exploratory research

The purpose of exploratory research is to investigate an area or issue on which little previous work has been carried out. An organisation may use this type of research to discover whether or not a problem exists within