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# CONTRIBUTION OF RESEARCH TO IMPROVEMENT OF ADULT EDUCATION QUALITY

Aleksandra Pejatović, Regina Egetenmeyer, Maria Slowey (Eds.)

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# QUALITY OF ADULT EDUCATION RESEARCH CONDUCTED THROUGH THE GLOBAL COMPUTER NETWORK

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## Abstract

In the past decades the Internet has become the subject of many adult education research studies, but it is also a tool with which the field of adult education is investigated. If there is intent to improve the quality of adult education it seems important to ensure the quality of research in this field in general, but also in that part which is conducted through the Internet.

The objective of this paper is to analyse quality issues concerning Internet use in adult education research. The method applied in this theoretical research is content analysis. This analysis refers to: sampling quality; quality of data; software quality; ethical considerations that reflect the most on adult education research quality.

The main results of this analysis indicate that the quality of adult educational research conducted through the Internet depends highly on achieved representativeness of samples, data validity, the safety of software equipment, and ensured participants' informed consent, voluntariness and confidentiality.

**Key words:** adult education research, adult education quality, research quality, Internet research.

## Introduction

As historical analysts state, the Internet emerged in the mid-eighties of the twentieth century as a globally wide-spread computer communication network (Leiner, 2009; Štambuk, 2004; Keefer and Baiget, 2001). Before that it had very strict and limited purposes. Its forerunner *ARPAnet* was used exclusively as a defensive military network in the United States during the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Although not conceived from the educational net-

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work, the Internet had connection with the educational field from its very beginnings. Even in the mid-seventies of the twentieth century, before the Internet had actually emerged, there was the intent to organise the functioning of an entire educational institution on networked communication based on information and communication technologies (*ICT*) (Ovesni, 1998). Another similar attempt happened in the mid-eighties of the twentieth century as Leiner (2009) states. These attempts were rarities since the mid-nineties, when *ICT* and the Internet became a part of almost every human activity. Thus, they became essential parts of education in general, but also a part of adult education. So, until the communicational function of computers didn't prevail and the Internet didn't emerge as a global network available to almost every part of the human living space, the basic preconditions for their use in the field of adult education were not satisfied and their application was rare and limited (Watson, 2006).

In past decades the Internet is observed and investigated as a *medium through which adult education is delivered* mostly through different models and forms of e-learning and online learning (Fee, 2008; Aldrich, 2005, 2004; Anderson and Elloumi, 2004; Bourne and Moore, 2004; Boshuizen and Kirschner, 2004; Aragon and Johnson, 2002; Rosenburg, 2001; Bonk, Kirkley, Hara and Dennen, 2000; Ovesni, 1998; Ovesni i Samurović, 1997). Besides that, the Internet as a *tool by which researches in adult education are conducted* is also relevant and an actual topic (Dillman, 2007; Dicks, Mason, Coffey and Atkinson, 2005; Mann, 2006; Buchanan, 2004; Hewson, Yule, Laurent and Vogel, 2003; Nosek, Banaji, and Greenwald, 2002; Mann and Stewart, 2000).

In this paper the focus is on the second of the two above-mentioned research aspects referring to the Internet. To be more specific we focus on the quality issues of adult education research conducted through the Internet, since we find it strongly related to the quality of adult education itself. So, the objective of this paper is to analyse quality issues concerning Internet use in adult education research. The research method applied in this exploration is content analysis. This theoretical research and analysis of relevant previous research findings covers subjects such as:

- Quality of sampling methodology via the Internet;
- Quality issues referring to gathering research data by using the Internet;
- Quality of software used in conducting educational research through the Internet;
- Some ethical considerations in Internet-mediated educational research that reflect the most on adult education research quality.

In the following sections we will discuss each issue mentioned above and present the results of the realised analysis.

## Quality issues of sampling methodology via the Internet

When we reflect on the quality of sampling methodology in educational research that is conducted through Internet, the most important issues that arise are the issues of sample representativeness and access to respondents. It seems logical to assume that the Internet population is more accessible than the population in the real (physical) world (Nosek, Banaji, and Greenwald, 2002; Mann and Stewart, 2000). As Mann and Stewart (2000) argue when using computer-mediated communication in scientific educational research, researchers extend access to potential participants by overcoming barriers such as geographical access, reaching participants that are physically hard to reach, individual psychological barriers (sensitivity or shame), limited access to politically sensitive sites, limited access to concrete interest groups etc. But, these statements are very arguable. That is because the Internet and computer-mediated communication is still available to limited parts of any research population despite the fact that the Internet is rapidly growing and is available in almost every part of the world. Having in mind that the Internet demographic is dramatically skewed, the problem of representativeness and validity becomes more visible. Results of some inquiries (Hewson, Yule, Laurent and Vogel, 2003) suggest that there seems to be a tendency for Internet samples to have a wider age range and to be more ethnically diverse, and perhaps to contain more males than females. However, it seems apparent that the type of sample obtained will rely heavily on the sampling methodology employed, for both traditional and Internet samples. Representativeness problems logically lead to the lack of possibilities for delivering general conclusions no matter what the subject of an educational research is, which surely reflects on research quality in general.

The perceived fact that respondents are more accessible is also arguable. Beside the facts that the asynchrony of communication via the Internet provides opportunity to get responses without thinking about the time or place factors and that Internet-mediated research is cheaper (Dillman, 2007; Hewson, Yule, Laurent and Vogel, 2003; Stewart, 2000), there is still a question of respondents' availability in educational researches. So, it is important to make a distinction between *accessibility* and *availability* of respondents in an adult educational research project conducted through Internet. The point is that all the preconditions to participate in an educational research project could be fulfilled but the low response rate would still be present. For example, we conducted a research concerning the issues of students' computer literacy and their relation toward some aspects of education in computer classrooms (Ljujić, 2013; 2011). In this research we investigated only 34 out of 209 respondents through computer mediated communication. Sheehan (2001) explains the reasons and gives some practical advice that should increase the response rate in adult education researches

and by that improve the quality of these researches. He states that the main factors that impact the response rates are:

- The extent of the online survey – the more extensive the survey is, the lower the response rate is;
- Early announcement about the examination – if respondents are informed in the right time that the research is going to be conducted, the response rates are more likely to be higher;
- Subsequent notification – repeated information and calls for participation increases response rates in educational research;
- Significance and contemporaneity of research topic – the more the subject of the research is perceived by participants as significant and actual, the higher the response rates.

In our case none of these suggestions had long-lasting results. Results were immediate, but pretty soon the response rate decreased. How to explain this? Well, there can be different reasons – maybe respondents feel more free to decide to not participate in the investigation when the “technological wall” is between him/her and data collector. When they find themselves in a face-to face situation with the researcher, respondents may be more motivated to participate in investigation rather than to come out with explanations and reasons that are not based on logical or objective trammels for participation. However, some issues concerning the quality of data collecting instruments will be discussed in the following sections and some implications referring to the problem of response rates might be revealed.

## Quality of data collecting instruments

Technological and software solutions provide the opportunity to create a wide range of data collecting instruments (questionnaires, interviews, observation lists, etc.) that are potentially attractive and easy to apply (Dillman, 2007; Hewson, Yule, Laurent and Vogel, 2003; Mann and Stewart, 2000). However, the issue of validity of data collected in Internet-mediated educational researches is actual, which threatens to decrease the quality of educational research conducted through Internet.

As Hewson, Yule, Laurent and Vogel (2003, p. 44) argue, in general, Internet-based procedures are likely to reduce the level of researcher control and involvement. So when materials are delivered through a computer network, rather than in person, the researcher is less able to judge the extent to which responses are sincere and genuine, the conditions under which the questionnaire was answered, the state of participants at the time of participation (for example, intoxicated, distracted, and so on), and the identity of participants. The possibility of

fraudulent responses means that asking participants for details of these factors may not lead to accurate information. The extent to which this lack of direct control may present a problem for researches that are conducted through the Internet is still a subject that needs to be explored, especially the motivation for giving insincere answers.

Dillman (2007) observes educational researches conducted through the Internet as a specific form of social exchange. In that sense, some of recommendations he mentions should increase the quality of data collection in virtual environments and maybe reduce the rate of appearance of some of the problems mentioned earlier. These recommendations refer to:

- *Showing positive regard* which means that respondents should be informed about why the research is being conducted, provide channels through which respondents can pose any questions considering research etc.
- *Give appreciation* to respondents for their effort launched in one educational research that is conducted through Internet.
- *Ask for advice* since people often get a sense of accomplishment from knowing that they have helped someone.
- *Support group values* since most people identify with certain groups. The values that should be supported depend on the population that is in focus in one educational research realised via Internet.
- *Give tangible rewards* such as small amount of money. This is effective because it raises a sense of obligation which disappears after the adequately filled research instrument is returned to researcher.
- *Make the instrument interesting* by improving layout, template and design, putting more interesting questions at the beginning, making questions easy to answer etc. This can lead to higher response rates, but also to authentic answers which increase the quality of research in general.
- *Give social validation* means that respondents are informed that other people have also participated in educational research via Internet. It is highly motivating for many people to do actions that others have also done.
- *Give the information to respondents that it is a very rare situation (opportunity) to participate in an educational research via Internet* also has a motivational effect on participants, leading them to decide to actually participate in a research.
- *Avoid subordinating language* because people are most likely to avoid answering questions that makes them feel subordinated.
- *Avoid embarrassment* that could be the result of sensitive questions, indistinctive questions or inadequate order of questions.
- *Make instruments appear short and easy to fill out* because this attracts people to respond and increases the response rates, as has already been mentioned.

- *Minimize requests to obtain personal information* because there is a wide range of information that respondents do not want to reveal especially in virtual environments.
- *Keep requests similar to previous requests* since there is a tendency that participants develop hostility toward participating in educational research that reveals any kind of inconsistency (Dillman, 2007).

It is obvious that these recommendations are not easy to achieve all at once. But it is also a fact that it is not impossible. So the importance of following the points mentioned above for a sufficient level of adult educational research quality to be reached, is evident.

## Software quality in educational research conducted through the Internet

There is a variety of technological solutions that make adult educational research through the Internet possible and easy. As Hewson, Yule, Laurent and Vogel (2003) state *FTP (File Transfer Protocol)* was the basic tool for using the Internet for research purposes since it was the first advanced form of data exchange through *WWW (World Wide Web)* as the most wide-spread Internet service. Today *FTP* is normally used since it is incorporated in different web browsers, which are the basic software that provides the ability to surf the Internet.

According to different authors (Hewson, Yule, Laurent and Vogel, 2003; Mann and Stewart, 2000) the *WWW* is the most important delivery system in educational research on the Internet. At the core of using the *WWW* for research purposes is the application of web browsers through which the stimuli are presented, responses are collected and are automatically sent back to the researcher. Web browsers are convenient in terms of educational research since they support many useful functions such as displaying text, graphics, animations and other sophisticated interactive programs. In other words, web browsers provide the opportunity to use different forms of multimedia (audio and video streams) for the purposes of realisation of educational research. Speaking in terms of synchrony of communication on the Internet we can point out different kinds of synchronous and asynchronous forms of computer-mediated communication. Amongst the asynchronous forms e-mail, mailing lists, newsgroups and *USENET* newsgroups play the most important role in educational research. Synchronous communication in virtual environments is realised through chats, audio and video conferencing etc.

In terms of the quality of educational research conducted through the Internet it seems important to point out the *safety* and *stability* of software equipment mentioned above as aspects of technological and software quality. Since the issue of stability is pretty clear, the intent here is to emphasize some aspects of

safety regarding research via the Internet. These aspects mostly consider potential misbehaviour that could be manifested by some respondents in educational research, which is directly connected to the aforementioned problems of validity. First, potential “hacking” activity which is, in terms of educational research, seen as intentional action directed toward interrupting educational research should be brought to minimum if can’t be eliminated completely. In this regard, control of the IP (*Internet Protocol*) addresses from which respondents are posting their responses, or a log to communicate with the researcher is highly recommended and is not that hard to accomplish. Secondly, researchers should also be aware of the fact that people online have their online identities and that they are acting in accordance with these identities. As an illustration for that, three types of identities that people have in virtual worlds of video games could be used. Gee (2003) points out that when playing video games people have their *virtual*, *real*, and *projective identity* in virtual worlds. In short, in virtual environments people tend to behave as virtual characters (*virtual identity*), and according to that they try to achieve a projection that is prescribed to that character (*projective identity*). So, if there is recognition that respondents are significantly different in online worlds than in the real world (if their virtual or projective identity dominate), they should be excluded from the inquiry. These issues are connected to intentional deception that is very common in Internet-mediated research.

## Ethical issues and adult educational research quality via the Internet

Ethical considerations are a very present subject in contemporary literature concerning adult educational research via the Internet (Buchanan, 2004; Hewson, Yule, Laurent and Vogel, 2003; Nosek, Banaji, and Greenwald, 2002; Mann and Stewart, 2000). Focusing on the quality of adult educational research on the Internet, some specific ethical issues can be segregated. These issues refer to *obtaining consent* to participate in educational research, ensuring *voluntary* participation, *confidentiality*, *security* and *anonymity* of respondents and clarifying the distinction between *private* and *public* space in virtual adult education research environments.

As Hewson, Yule, Laurent and Vogel (2003) state the issue of *informed consent* arises since it is easier for the participant to deceive the researcher over the Internet. This is highly related to data validity, as mentioned earlier. Traditional research settings provide the opportunity for the researcher to obtain consent by asking respondents to sign an agreement for participation in research. Since there are age limitations to participation, the problems that occur in research conducted via the Internet are related to the fact that participants have greater opportunity to lie about their age. Aforementioned authors suggest that the solu-

tion for this problem may be achieved by asking the participant to click on some kind of confirmatory button that is visible on the web page. An alternative may be sending a password by e-mail to potential participants who were identified to be of adequate age. By using this password, participants can then enter the research procedure.

To ensure that participation is entirely *voluntary* it should be easy for participants to withdraw from the research at any chosen moment (Hewson, Yule, Laurent and Vogel, 2003; Nosek, Banaji, and Greenwald, 2002; Mann and Stewart, 2000). Again, this issue is resolvable by putting a visible button on the web page that allows the participant to quit the research procedure at any time. It is also recommended that respondents are informed at the very beginning of the research that they are absolutely free to enter and leave the investigation whenever they want.

Ensuring *confidentiality* and *security* of information is another important ethical issue referring to the quality of adult education research on the Internet. It is more likely that research data will be seen by a third party in virtual research environments than in those environments which are mostly defined by physical parameters (making typing errors while sending an e-mail is only one of the reasons this could happen). There is also a problem of potential hacking activity that threatens participants' privacy which is clearly exclusively related to virtual research environments. Problems of confidentiality and security are very close to the issue of *anonymity*. According to Nosek, Banaji, and Greenwald (2002, p. 165), this issue is easier to overcome in Internet-mediated researches than in those conducted in face-to-face settings. They argue that issue of anonymity can be controlled by using floating IP addresses in research communication on the Internet by which real-life identities of participants are never being revealed. Another way to increase the level of confidentiality and security and to ensure anonymity in educational research conducted online that those authors suggest is exchanging research information through *secure server lines* (SSL), which is an encryption technology that encodes information from participant to machine in a form that it is meaningless if intercepted in the process of transmission.

Since the Internet provides a wide range of forms of communication the issue of the distinction between *private* and *public* space on the Internet has become actual. As Hewson, Yule, Laurent and Vogel (2003) argue the main question is whether the researcher is ethically justified in using publicly available information as data for a research study. To be more specific, the question is in which context is this ethically acceptable or not acceptable? Authors' positions on this matter differ. In general, there is an opinion that all information that is available in the public space on the WWW could be used by researchers, but not hackers or other potential intruders in an adult educational research. On the

other side, data that is considered to be private should never be used in conducting adult educational research on the Internet.

## Conclusion

In this paper the focus was on analysis of the Internet when observed as a *tool* with which adult education research is conducted. The emphasis was on the quality issues of adult education research realised through Internet. The importance of such an investigation is reflected in the belief that the quality of adult education itself is strongly connected with the quality of adult education research in general. Since the contemporary state of technological development provides more opportunities for research activity in the field of adult education (both in a qualitative and quantitative sense) it seems quite important to examine the aspects of adult education research quality that is conducted in technologically empowered environments, based on the Internet as a global computer network.

The results of the literature analysis presented in this paper leads us to several conclusions. To be more specific, the quality of adult education research conducted through Internet highly depends on the following:

- Quality of sampling methodology via Internet. This is mostly in connection with assuring sample representativeness and access to potential participants (recognising the difference between accessibility and availability in order to increase response rates);
- Quality issues when it comes to gathering research data by using the Internet. This is affected by the quality of data collecting instruments used online, which determines the validity of gathered data;
- Quality of software used in conducting educational research through Internet that is mostly defined by the stability and safety aspects of the software application; and
- Some ethical considerations in Internet-mediated educational research which reflect the most on adult education research quality, among which issues of obtaining informed consent for participation, voluntariness to participate, confidentiality, security and anonymity of respondents and clarification of the difference between public and private space in virtual research environments, stand out.

It is obvious that the aforementioned issues are not new in terms of phenomenological meaning, but these are novelties in the sense of the changing technological background they emerged from. Also these issues are more noticeable in adult education research environments based on new technologies such as the Internet, compared to environments in which relevant factors are determined mostly by physical elements.



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