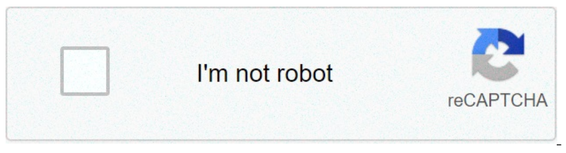

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Descriptive comparative research design pdf

Descriptive research does not fit neatly into the definition of either quantitative or qualitative research methodologies, but instead it can utilize elements of both, often within the same study. The term descriptive research refers to the type of research question, design, and data analysis that will be applied to a given topic. Descriptive statistics tell what is, while inferential statistics try to determine cause and effect. The type of question asked by the researcher will ultimately determine the type of approach necessary to complete an accurate assessment of the topic at hand. Descriptive studies, primarily concerned with finding out "what is," might be applied to investigate the following questions: Do teachers hold favorable attitudes toward using computers in schools? What kinds of activities that involve technology occur in sixth-grade classrooms and how frequently do they occur? What have been the reactions of school administrators to technological innovations in teaching the social sciences? How have high school computing courses changed over the last 10 years? How do the new multimediated textbooks compare to the print-based textbooks? How are decisions being made about using Channel One in schools, and for those schools that choose to use it, how is Channel One being implemented? What is the best way to provide access to computer equipment in schools? How should instructional designers improve software design to make the software more appealing to students? To what degree are special-education teachers well versed concerning assistive technology? Is there a relationship between experience with multimedia computers and problem-solving skills? How successful is a certain satellite-delivered Spanish course in terms of motivational value and academic achievement? Do teachers actually implement technology in the way they perceive? How many people use the AECT gopher server, and what do they use if for? Descriptive research can be either quantitative or qualitative. It can involve collections of quantitative information that can be tabulated along a continuum in numerical form, such as scores on a test or the number of times a person chooses to use a-certain feature of a multimedia program, or it can describe categories of information such as gender or patterns of interaction when using technology in a group situation. Descriptive research involves gathering data that describe events and then organizes, tabulates, depicts, and describes the data collection (Glass & Hopkins, 1984). It often uses visual aids such as graphs and charts to aid the reader in understanding the data distribution. Because the human mind cannot extract the full import of a large mass of raw data, descriptive statistics are very important in reducing the data to manageable form. When in-depth, narrative descriptions of small numbers of cases are involved, the research uses description as a tool to organize data into patterns that emerge during analysis. Those patterns aid the mind in comprehending a qualitative study and its implications. Most quantitative research falls into two areas: studies that describe events and studies aimed at discovering inferences or causal relationships. Descriptive studies are aimed at finding out "what is," so observational and survey methods are frequently used to collect descriptive data (Borg & Gall, 1989). Studies of this type might describe the current state of multimedia usage in schools or patterns of activity resulting from group work at the computer. An example of this is Cochenour, Hakes, and Neal's (1994) study of trends in compressed video applications with education and the private sector. Descriptive studies report summary data such as measures of central tendency including the mean, median, mode, deviance from the mean, variation, percentage, and correlation between variables. Survey research commonly includes that type of measurement, but often goes beyond the descriptive statistics in order to draw inferences. See, for example, Signer's (1991) survey of computer-assisted instruction and at-risk students, or Nolan, McKinnon, and Soler's (1992) research on achieving equitable access to school computers. Thick, rich descriptions of phenomena can also emerge from qualitative studies, case studies, observational studies, interviews, and portfolio assessments. Robinson's (1994) case study of a televised news program in classrooms and Lee's (1994) case study about identifying values concerning school restructuring are excellent examples of case studies. Descriptive research is unique in the number of variables employed. Like other types of research, descriptive research can include multiple variables for analysis, yet unlike other methods, it requires only one variable (Borg & Gall, 1989). For example, a descriptive study might employ methods of analyzing correlations between multiple variables by using tests such as Pearson's Product Moment correlation, regression, or multiple regression analysis. Good examples of this are the Knupfer and Hayes (1994) study about the effects of the Channel One broadcast on knowledge of current events, Manaev's (1991) study about mass media effectiveness, McKenna's (1993) study of the relationship between attributes of a radio program and it's appeal to listeners, Orey and Nelson's (1994) examination of learner interactions with hypermedia environments, and Shapiro's (1991) study of memory and decision processes. On the other hand, descriptive research might simply report the percentage summary on a single variable. Examples of this are the tally of reference citations in selected instructional design and technology journals by Anglin and Towers (1992); Barry's (1994) investigation of the controversy surrounding advertising and Channel One; Lu, Morlan, Lerchlorlarn, Lee, and Dike's (1993) investigation of the international utilization of media in education (1993); and Pettersson, Metallinos, Muffoletto, Shaw, and Takakuwa's (1993) analysis of the use of verbo-visual information in teaching geography in various countries. Descriptive statistics utilize data collection and analysis techniques that yield reports concerning the measures of central tendency, variation, and correlation. The combination of its characteristic summary and correlational statistics, along with its focus on specific types of research questions, methods, and outcomes is what distinguishes descriptive research from other research types. Three main purposes of research are to describe, explain, and validate findings. Description emerges following creative exploration, and serves to organize the findings in order to fit them with explanations, and then test or validate those explanations (Krathwohl, 1993). Many research studies call for the description of natural or man-made phenomena such as their form, structure, activity, change over time, relation to other phenomena, and so on. The description often illuminates knowledge that we might not otherwise notice or even encounter. Several important scientific discoveries as well as anthropological information about events outside of our common experiences have resulted from making such descriptions. For example, astronomers use their telescopes to develop descriptions of different parts of the universe, anthropologists describe life events of socially atypical situations or cultures uniquely different from our own, and educational researchers describe activities within classrooms concerning the implementation of technology. This process sometimes results in the discovery of stars and stellar events, new knowledge about value systems or practices of other cultures, or even the reality of classroom life as new technologies are implemented within schools. Educational researchers might use observational, survey, and interview techniques to collect data about group dynamics during computer-based activities. These data could then be used to recommend specific strategies for implementing computers or improving teaching strategies. Two excellent studies concerning the role of collaborative groups were conducted by Webb (1982), and Rysavy and Sales (1991). Noreen Webb's landmark study used descriptive research techniques to investigate collaborative groups as they worked within classrooms. Rysavy and Sales also apply a descriptive approach to study the role of group collaboration for working at computers. The Rysavy and Sales approach did not observe students in classrooms, but reported certain common findings that emerged through a literature search. Descriptive studies have an important role in educational research. They have greatly increased our knowledge about what happens in schools. Some of the important books in education have reported studies of this type: Life in Classrooms, by Philip Jackson; The Good High School, by Sara Lawrence Lightfoot; Teachers and Machines: The Classroom Use of Technology Since 1920, by Larry Cuban; A Place Called School, by John Goodlad; Visual Literacy: A Spectrum of Learning, by D. M. Moore and Dwyer; Computers in Education: Social, Political, and Historical Perspectives, by Muffoletto and Knupfer; and Contemporary Issues in American Distance Education, by M. G. Moore. Henry J. Becker's (1986) series of survey reports concerning the implementation of computers into schools across the United States as well as Nancy Nelson Knupfer's (1988) reports about teacher's opinions and patterns of computer usage also fit partially within the realm of descriptive research. Both studies describe categories of data and use statistical analysis to examine correlations between specific variables. Both also go beyond the bounds of descriptive research and conduct further statistical procedures appropriate to their research questions, thus enabling them to make further recommendations about implementing computing technology in ways to support grassroots change and equitable practices within the schools. Finally, Knupfer's study extended the analysis and conclusions in order to yield suggestions for instructional designers involved with educational computing. 41.1.1 The Nature of Descriptive Research The descriptive function of research is heavily dependent on instrumentation for measurement and observation (Borg & Gall, 1989). Researchers may work for many years to perfect such instrumentation so that the resulting measurement will be accurate, reliable, and generalizable. Instruments such as the electron microscope, standardized tests for various purposes, the United States census, Michael Simonson's questionnaires about computer usage, and scores of thoroughly validated questionnaires are examples of some instruments that yield valuable descriptive data. Once the instruments are developed, they can be used to describe phenomena of interest to the researchers. The intent of some descriptive research is to produce statistical information about aspects of education that interests policy makers and educators. The National Center for Education Statistics specializes in this kind of research. Many of its findings are published in an annual volume called Digest of Educational Statistics. The center also administers the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which collects descriptive information about how well the nation's youth are doing in various subject areas. A typical NAEP publication is The Reading Report Card, which provides descriptive information about the reading achievement of junior high and high school students during the past 2 decades. On a larger scale, the International Association for the Evaluation of Education Achievement (IEA) has done major descriptive studies comparing the academic achievement levels of students in many different nations, including the United States (Borg & Gall, 1989). Within the United States, huge amounts of information are being gathered continuously by the Office of Technology Assessment, which influences policy concerning technology in education. As a way of offering guidance about the potential of technologies for distance education, that office has published a book called Linking for Learning: A New Course for Education, which offers descriptions of distance education and its potential. There has been an ongoing debate among researchers about the value of quantitative (see 40.1.2) versus qualitative research, and certain remarks have targeted descriptive research as being less pure than traditional experimental, quantitative designs. Rumors abound that young researchers must conduct quantitative research in order to get published in Educational Technology Research and Development and other prestigious journals in the field. One camp argues the benefits of a scientific approach to educational research, thus preferring the experimental, quantitative approach, while the other camp posits the need to recognize the unique human side of educational research questions and thus prefers to use qualitative research methodology. Because descriptive research spans both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, it brings the ability to describe events in greater or less depth as needed, to focus on various elements of different research techniques, and to engage quantitative statistics to organize information in meaningful ways. The citations within this chapter provide ample evidence that descriptive research can indeed be published in prestigious journals. Descriptive studies can yield rich data that lead to important recommendations. For example, Galloway (1992) bases recommendations for teaching with computer analogies on descriptive data, and Wehrs (1992) draws reasonable conclusions about using expert systems to support academic advising. On the other hand, descriptive research can be misused by those who do not understand its purpose and limitations. For example, one cannot try to draw conclusions that show cause and effect, because that is beyond the bounds of the statistics employed. Borg and Gall (1989) classify the outcomes of educational research into the four categories of description, prediction, improvement, and explanation. They say that descriptive research describes natural or man-made educational phenomena that is of interest to policy makers and educators. Predictions of educational phenomenon seek to determine whether certain students are at risk and if teachers should use different techniques to instruct them. Research about improvement asks whether a certain technique does something to help students learn better and whether certain interventions can improve student learning by applying causal-comparative, correlational, and experimental methods. The final category of explanation posits that research is able to explain a set of phenomena that leads to our ability to describe, predict, and control the phenomena with a high level of certainty and accuracy. This usually takes the form of theories. The methods of collecting data for descriptive research can be employed singly or in various combinations, depending on the research questions at hand. Descriptive research often calls upon quasi-experimental research design (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). Some of the common data collection methods applied to questions within the realm of descriptive research include surveys, interviews, observations, and portfolios.

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