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THE ANALYSIS OF DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

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Most projects will require the analysis of documentary evidence. This chapter aims to explain how to locate, categorize, select and analyse documents. Its approach is derived from historical methods which are essentially concerned with the problems of selection and evaluation of evidence. Such methods were first developed by von Ranke and have influenced the form of all academic report writing (Evans 2000: 18; Barzun and Graff 1992: 5). In some projects documentary analysis will be used to supplement information obtained by other methods, as for instance when the reliability of evidence gathered from interviews or questionnaires is checked. In others, it will be the central or even exclusive method of research. It will be particularly useful when access to the subjects of research is difficult or impossible, as in the case where a longitudinal study is undertaken and staff members no longer belong to the organization being investigated. The lack of access to research subjects may be frustrating, but documentary analysis of files and records can prove to be an extremely valuable alternative source of data (Johnson 1984: 23).

Approaches to documents

When embarking on a study using documents it is possible to have two different approaches. One has been called the 'source-oriented' approach in which you let the nature of the sources determine your project and help you generate questions for your research. The feasibility of the project would be determined by the nature of extant sources so that a particularly full collection of material, for example, on the restructuring of a college, would lead to an investigation of that area. You would not bring pre-determined questions to the sources but would be led by the material they contain. The second and much more common way of proceeding would be to employ the 'problem-oriented approach' which involves formulating questions by using other research methods and then by reading secondary sources. This method investigates what has already been discovered about the subject before establishing the focus of the study and then researching the relevant primary sources (these terms are defined below). As your research progresses, a much clearer idea of which sources are relevant will emerge and more questions will occur to you as your knowledge of the subject deepens (Tosh 2002: Ch. 4).

The location of documents

Document searches need to be carried out in exactly the same way as literature searches in order to assess whether your proposed project is feasible and to inform yourself about the background to, and the nature of, the subject. The document search may have to cover both national and local sources of evidence.

At the local level, the nature of the project will lead you to particular sources. A project on the relationship between a college and its funding body would require a document search of the records of both institutions and account would have to be taken of their special characteristics. If the college had an academic board or equivalent, its minutes would be one source; if the funding authority's departments dealt with different aspects of the college's administration, their records would be significant. It is important to inquire what archives or collections of records

exist in an organization. In schools, which records are preserved by the office, the governing body, the bursar or financial officer or the library and which records are stored by individuals or departments in the institution? Does the local education authority hold records for particular schools? How long do organizations hold on to records before they dispose of them? Schools have a legal duty to preserve attendance registers for the current year and the next two years. Informed advice, however, suggests that admission registers should be stored indefinitely. It has also been suggested by a headteachers professional association that pupils' records be kept for at least ten years and the results of public examinations kept indefinitely (Croner 2002: 1–360).

Local education authorities issue guidance on the preservation of records of different types including financial documents, documents related to supplies, employee-related documents and general documents. It can be helpful to be aware of these requirements and the arrangements for storing and gaining access to local documents by authorities. The safeguarding of 'school annals' to record events deserving of permanent record in the history of a school is at the discretion of the school. Researchers can be frustrated by the official and unofficial weeding policy of institutions and of government departments which may have resulted in the destruction of sources later discovered to be significant (Duffy 1998: 29–30).

National records have proliferated since the advent of a national education system and it is important to decide which official sources are needed for a particular local project. Such sources can be published *and* unpublished. A project may require a trawl of government green papers, white papers, guidance papers, government statistics, inspection reports, statutes, policy papers, as well as the scrutiny of the local sources. The Internet is an invaluable aid to locating official documents but as a researcher you must also be prepared to hunt down other sources of information particularly in the local context (McCulloch and Richardson 2000: 86). It can never be assumed, of course, that just because documents exist, they will be available for research. Some sources may be regarded as too confidential to be released, so enquiries would have to be made about access and availability.

The nature of documentary evidence

During the document search it is helpful to clarify exactly what kinds of documents exist. 'Document' is a general term for an impression left on a physical object by a human being. Research can involve the analysis of photographs, films, videos, slides and other non-written sources, all of which can be classed as documents, but the most common kinds of documents in educational research are written as printed or manuscript sources, so this chapter concentrates on these. Sources can also be quantitative or statistical in nature but it would be mistaken, of course, to regard these so-called 'hard' sources of evidence as being more reliable than other kinds of material. It is vitally important to employ the recommended critical method of analysis to check how the figures have been produced. What has been counted? How correctly? By whom? When? Where? And why? (Stanford 1994).

Primary and secondary sources

Documents can be divided into primary and secondary sources. **Primary sources** are those which came into existence in the period under research (e.g. the minutes of a school's governors' meetings). **Secondary sources** are interpretations of events of that period based on primary sources (e.g. a history of that school which obtained evidence from the governors' minutes). The distinction is complicated by the fact that some documents are primary from one point of view and secondary from another. If the author of the school history were the subject of research, for example, her book would become a primary source for the researcher. The term 'secondary analysis' used in a narrow sense by some social scientists to mean the re-analysis of data such as survey material or primary documents gathered by other researchers in collections is not to be confused with the use of secondary sources (Hakim 2000). Such 'secondary analysis' is, of course, primary research as defined here.

Deliberate and inadvertent sources

Primary sources can in turn be divided into:

1 **Deliberate sources**, which are produced for the attention of future researchers. These would include autobiographies, memoirs of politicians or educationalists, diaries or letters intended for later publication, and documents of self-justification (Elton 2002). They involve a deliberate attempt to preserve evidence for the future, possibly for purposes of self-vindication or reputation enhancement (Lehmann and Mehrens 1971).
2 **Inadvertent sources**, which are used by the researcher for some purpose other than that for which they were originally intended. They are produced by the processes of local and central government and from the everyday working of the education system.

Examples of such primary documents are:

- the records of legislative bodies, government departments, and local education authorities;
- evidence from national databases including performance data on individual schools;
- inspection reports;
- national surveys;
- the publications of professional associations, subject teaching associations and trades unions;
- the minutes of academic boards, senior management groups, middle management meetings, subject departments, working groups, staff meetings and parents' associations;
- letters and correspondence of educational institutions;
- annual governors' reports;
- handbooks and prospectuses;
- examination papers;
- attendance registers;
- personal files;
- staffing returns;
- option-choice documents;

- bulletins;
- newspapers and journals;
- budget statements;
- school or college web sites and other Internet material.

Such inadvertent documents are the more common and usually the more valuable kind of primary sources. They were produced for a contemporary practical purpose and would therefore seem to be more straightforward than deliberate sources. This may be the case but great care still needs to be taken with them because it cannot be discounted that inadvertent documents were intended to deceive someone other than the researcher, or that what first appear to be inadvertent sources (some government records, for example) are actually attempts to justify actions to future generations (Elton 2002: 71). Some of the documents generated by a school for an inspection may have the aim of giving the best possible impression to the inspectors; without the imminent inspection, the school might not be so prolific in its production of policy statements and schemes of work or so up-to-date in its staff handbook.

Witting and unwitting evidence

A final point about the nature of documents concerns their 'witting' and 'unwitting' evidence. Witting evidence is the information which the original author of the document wanted to impart. Unwitting evidence is everything else that can be learned from the document (Marwick 2001: 172–9). If, for example, a government minister made a speech announcing a proposed educational reform, the witting evidence would be everything that was stated in the speech about the proposed change. The unwitting evidence, on the other hand, might come from any underlying assumptions unintentionally revealed by the minister in the language he or she used, and from the fact that a particular method had been chosen by the government to announce the reform. If a junior minister is given the job of announcing a reduction in educational expenditure it may well indicate the expectation on the part of more senior colleagues that the government will

be criticized. All documents provide unwitting evidence, but it is the task of the researcher to try to assess its precise significance.

The selection of documents

The quantity of documentary material that you can study will inevitably be influenced by the amount of time that is available for this stage of your research. It is not usually possible to analyse everything and so you must decide what to select. Familiarity with the different categories of evidence will help you to make decisions about what is fundamental to the project, and 'controlled selection' is then needed to ensure that no significant category is left out (Elton 2002). Try not to include too many deliberate sources and take care not to select documents merely on the basis of how well they support your own views or hypotheses. Your aim is to make as balanced a selection as possible, bearing in mind the constraints of time. Periodically, check with your schedule, and if you find that you are encroaching on time allocated for the next stage of your research, take steps to reduce your selection. Your perception of what is valuable will grow as the project develops.

Content analysis

The proper selection of documents is particularly important in what is termed 'content analysis' which has been defined as 'a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context' (Krippendorff 1980: 21). Content analysis has been used to analyse bias in news reporting, the content of newspapers, the extent of sexual or racial stereotypes in textbooks, the differences in black and white popular song lyrics and the nationalist bias in history textbooks (Weber 1990: 10). It usually involves counting the number of times particular terms or 'recording units' occur in a sample of sources but it could also involve such methods as counting the number of column inches devoted to a subject in a newspaper or the number of photographs in a publication. It might be possible to study all the documents in

a particular category such as school newsletters or prospectuses but in other cases a sampling technique is needed. Such an example would be if a daily newspaper is selected in a research project investigating tabloid newspapers' attitudes to a particular institution or organization. You could examine all the editions of a newspaper over a three-month period or you could take the first week in each month over a one-year period. The nature of the sample must be able to be defended and it must be sufficiently large to allow valid conclusions. If the researcher was interested in the media presentation of teachers' associations, the sampling of newspapers from the first week of each month would be very inappropriate because significant references to specific associations are unlikely to be confined to the first week of each month. Having established the frequency of your chosen terms, you must then be able to place them in context before interpreting and explaining them. In order to do that successfully it is necessary to apply the critical method advocated below. Content analysis of documents can be very arid in its approach if the nature of the documents is not analysed in the way suggested here and it may not be appropriate for many small-scale studies.

The critical analysis of documents

External criticism

The analysis of documents can be divided into **external** and **internal criticism**, even though these may overlap to a large extent. External criticism aims to discover whether a document is both genuine (i.e. not forged) and authentic (i.e. it is what it purports to be and truthfully reports on its subject) (Barzun and Graff 1992: 99n). For example, an observer could write a report of a meeting he had never attended or a play he had never seen. His report would be genuine, because he actually wrote it, but it would not be authentic because he was not present at the meeting or the play.

In external criticism it is necessary to know for certain that the author produced the document, so certain questions need to be asked. In the case of a letter, they would include the following:

- Was the author of a letter known to be in the place from which it came at the time it was written?
- Do other sources corroborate that the person wrote the letter? Is the letter consistent with all other facts known about the author?
- Does it use the same arrangements and have the same form as similar documents?
- Is it typical of other letters or documents written by the author?

It is unlikely you will need or be able to verify any forgeries or hoaxes but an attempt should be made to decide whether a person did actually compose the speech delivered or write the letter with her signature on it.

Internal criticism

The analytical method more likely to be used in small-scale educational research is internal criticism, in which the contents of a document are subjected to rigorous analysis which first seeks answers to the following questions:

- What kind of document is it? A government circular? A statute? A policy paper? A set of minutes? A letter from a long correspondence? How many copies are there?
- What does it actually say? Are the terms used employed in the same way as you would use them? Documents such as statutes or legal papers may employ a specialized language which must be mastered, and private correspondence may use terms in an idiosyncratic way that also needs to be understood. A curious example comes from the language used in government school inspections. Judgements that classified teaching as 'satisfactory' could, in fact, still lead to a school being judged a failure because of the supposed rising social expectations about school standards and the fact that inspectors take into account other factors such as the quality of pupils' work (Ofsted 2003). In this case, therefore, 'satisfactory' would mean 'unsatisfactory' (*Times Educational Supplement* 2003).
- Who produced it? What is known about the author?

- What was its purpose? Did the author aim to inform, command, remind (as in a memorandum) or want to have some other effect on the reader? A document is always written for a particular readership and shaped according to the writer's expectations of how intended readers will interpret it. In the same way, the reader is always conscious of the purposes and intentions of the writer during the act of reading.
- When and in what circumstances was it produced? How did it come into existence?
- Is it typical or exceptional of its type?
- Is it complete? Has it been altered or edited? It may be that there is more chance of completeness if it is published a long time after the events it describes.

You will also need to assess the assiduousness of the producers of documents. Staff will complete documents very carefully if they are to be used in appeals procedures or public meetings. For example, teachers' approach to reporting on a pupil will be different if they know the pupil's parents and others will see the document rather than just their colleagues.

After asking these basic questions, you will need to ask further questions about the author:

- What is known about the author's social background, political views, aims and past experience?
- Did the author experience or observe what is being described? If so, was he or she an expert on what was being witnessed and a trained observer of the events described?
- Did the author habitually tell the truth or exaggerate, distort or omit?
- How long after the event did the author produce the document? Is it possible that memory played tricks?

All these questions may not be relevant to all documents, but in aiming at critical analysis it is important not to accept sources at face value. Examine them carefully. Gaps in the evidence can sometimes be very significant as it may indicate a prejudice or a determination to ignore a proposed change. Decide whether a particular political affiliation might possibly influence the tone or

emphasis of a paper and try to come to a conclusion based on all the available evidence. An assessment of the document's reliability must involve the question of : 'Reliable for what?' Is it a reliable explanation of the author's views on an issue, in other words, is it representative of those views? It might not be truthful in a more general sense in a way that, for instance the supporter of streaming in schools may not necessarily convey the truth about the effects of using this method of organizing classes in a school but it would be a truthful and therefore reliable expression of this individual's views on the subject. Alternatively the source might be a reliable example of its type, as in the case of a document from a long series.

Fact or bias?

One important aim of critical scholarship is to assess whether fact or bias is the main characteristic of a document (Barzun and Graff 1992: 189). Writers will rarely declare their assumptions so it is the task of the researcher to expose them if possible. Watch particularly for any terms that suggest partisanship. Ask yourself whether the evidence supplied in the document convincingly supports the author's arguments. Was the author a supporter of a particular course of action in which he had a stake? If the document goes against the author's own interest, it may increase the likelihood that it tells the truth. Was the author affected by pressure, fear or even vanity when writing the document (Best 1970: 105)? Look for clues.

If you detect bias, that does not necessarily mean that the document should be dismissed as worthless. In some cases the most useful evidence can be derived from biased sources which accurately reveal the true views of an individual or group. Inferences can still be drawn from the 'unwitting' testimony, even if the 'witting' evidence is thought to be unsound. A prejudiced account of curriculum development, for example, could provide valuable insights into the political processes involved in innovation. The biased document will certainly need to be analysed cautiously and compared with evidence from other sources, but it can still be valuable.

Try to stand in the position of the author of the document and to see through his or her eyes. Instead of jumping to early conclusions, deliberately seek contrary evidence to test the truthfulness of a document as rigorously as possible – and watch out for your own bias. It may be easier to recognize bias in others than in ourselves, and it is tempting to reject evidence that does not support our case, but try to resist the temptation. Sources can be interpreted in different ways (even though some sources can reasonably be understood in only one way) but the postmodernist view that documents can be subjected to an infinity of meaning has been brilliantly demolished by Evans (2000). The guiding principle in document analysis is nevertheless that everything should be questioned. Qualities of scepticism as well as empathy need to be developed.

It could be argued that the techniques of document analysis suggested here are merely the application of common sense (Tosh 2002: 105). This is partly true but as you study the sources, you will gradually gain insights and detailed knowledge which will give you a 'higher common sense' which will in turn permit a fuller appreciation of the worth of the evidence (Barzun and Graff 1992: 159–60). Eventually, the critical method becomes a habit which will allow you, in Marwick's phrase, to 'squeeze the last drop' from each document (Marwick 2001 [1989]: 233).

The analysis of documentary evidence checklist

1 Decide how you want to use documentary evidence.	Will it be used to supplement other sources of evidence or will you use it as the exclusive method of gathering data?
2 Decide on your approach to the documents.	You can let the source material determine your research or, more commonly, you will formulate your research questions after reading the literature on the subject and then take these questions to the sources.

3	Undertake a document search to ascertain the existence of different sources of information.	These may be found in different places in an organization so it is important to be persistent. Always negotiate access to the documents and do not assume that you can consult them; some information may be confidential.
4	Analyse the nature of the sources used.	Some sources will be deliberately produced for the attention of future researchers but, more usually, sources will be inadvertently produced by the everyday working of the system/organization you are researching.
5	If the documents are bulky, it may be necessary to decide on a sampling strategy.	Try to read a balanced selection of documents in the time you have available. The strategy must be appropriate to the purposes of your research and be capable of being justified in the report.
6	Be aware that there may be different kinds of evidence in each document.	Look for 'witting' and 'unwitting' evidence.
7	Subject each document to the critical method and ask a range of questions.	What does it say? Who wrote it? Why? How did it come into existence? Is it typical of its kind? Is it complete?
8	Compare the document with other sources to see if it is accurate or representative.	
9	Then ask further questions about the authors of the document.	What is their background? And what are their social and political views? Did they experience or observe what they were writing about? Did they usually tell the truth?

10	Look for signs of bias in the document.	Remember that biased evidence can be very valuable.
11	Decide whether the document is reliable for a particular purpose.	Check it against other sources to ascertain its truthfulness but remember that although it may not be an accurate account of an event or development, it may be a reliable expression of the author's views.
12	Strive to gain a full appreciation of the value of a source.	Use your accumulating knowledge to gain insights and try to make the critical method a habit in your research methods.