

# Combining Theory with Practical Skills in Social Research. An example that Involved Master Students in a Research on Reading Habits

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## Abstract

Working with university students in social sciences often involves creative ideas, a wide documentation, field research abilities and so on. In this article we intend to present a specific didactic project put into practice with master students in Public Relations and Advertising during one semester of the module called *Research techniques*. We organised all the activities in order to make an *action research* with *returning of inquiry findings*. All the students were involved in each stage of the project starting from the initial questions and all the way to general reports. Finally, they participated in a public conference where they presented some of the important results.

**Keywords:** Survey Research, Action Research, Reading Habits, Public Relations Campaigns.

## 1. Introduction

For our study we used the so called „action research” in two directions: educational and sociological methodology. Action research<sup>9</sup> in education can be a very useful tool for developing specific skills and abilities. The fact that teachers are researchers in the same time is not a new idea, as noticed by Elliot (1991) an author who tried to emphasize the activities involved in the educational action-research cycle: identifying and clarifying the general idea (which links an idea to action), reconnaissance (describing the facts of the situation and explaining the facts of the situation), building a general plan, developing the next action steps and implementing the next action steps. This kind of approach is named *classroom action research* (Kemmis, Taggart, 2005) and gives teachers self-understanding and judgements or „interpretations that teachers and students are making and acting on in the situation”. Classroom action research is based on data collection by teachers for the improvement of their own practices (see for examples Kemmis, Taggart, Nixon, 2014; 115-148). This classroom action research is added to other specific educational practices: critical action research, action learning, action science, soft system approaches etc. Put together, these practices constitute a true „family of action research”. Following these suggestions, the current term used is „participatory action research” (PAR). For our educational purpose we retained that, using PAR, „people can come to understand that- and how- their social and educational practices are located in, and are the product of, particular material, social, and historical circumstances that *produce* them and by which they are reproduced in everyday social interaction in a particular setting” (Kemmis, Taggart, 2005; 565).

From the sociological point of view, we applied an „action research” in terms of *action research* with *returning of inquiry findings*. This kind of research is participatory: BA students cooperate for the diagnosis of the reading practices of BA students and can direct this returning of findings to the researched community. The purpose of this kind of research is to determine change

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<sup>9</sup> The term belongs to K. Lewin (1946).

within the target population. Muchielli (1976, apud Pascaru 2011) noticed that, after the returning of findings, if the target population can recognise itself in the proposed image, it is the sign that the said population can change itself. After Bergier (2000, apud Pascaru 2011) there are three types of returning of findings: scientist, explanatory and militant. The French author recommends for all of these cases the use of the oral restitution in the presence of those investigated.

Finally, we used a public presentation of findings as a *public relations campaign* to explain the results of the research and to introduce a plea for reading, to increase the interest in reading of the new generations. We considered it very useful to create a public relations campaign resulting from an entire research design which included a restitution of findings to the target population. We remembered that an efficient public relation campaign can cause measurable changes in perception, opinion, attitude and behaviour inside and outside the organisation (Cutlip, Center, Broom, 2010; 5).

## 2. Working project

First of all, the master students were questioned on the role of reading in their personal life, the role of reading in cognitive and affective development, what are their reading preferences, the extent to which new electronic devices are used for reading, what time they reserved for reading, what are the advantages and disadvantages of reading on electronic devices etc. These sessions were conducted using focus group techniques (master students were separated in four groups). After open discussions, the master students suggested the steps to be followed; finding the appropriate bibliography, studying previous research etc. Forwards, the master students were involved in all stages of our research:

- defining the questions of the research
- calculating the size and the characteristics of the sample
- drafting and testing of the questionnaire
- applying the questionnaire on the field
- building databases and statistical analysis

After this stage of the field research, all the master students received the data base and each one had the task to write a research report on the subject. The last task was a student reunion into small spontaneous groups that each imagined a PR strategy designed to promote reading among university students. All the results of the quantitative and qualitative approach were presented in a public conference in front of all university students interested in the issue. The public presentation was subject to intense debate.

## 3. Results of the research

The research was carried out in May 2017, at the University Al. I. Cuza from Iasi, by applying questionnaires to a representative sample of 963 students (maximum error  $\pm 3.2\%$  and confidence level 95%). First of all, the great majority of respondents recognized the role of reading in cognitive and personal affective development. The motivations for reading are very diverse: I read to know (29%), for relaxation (23.5%), I read out of curiosity (18%), for a personal escape (14%), to be improve professionally(12%). Just 4% declared that they read by habit.

On the other hand, 88% declared that reading is important and very important for them. Unfortunately, only 36% declared that they were informed about new books, 32% declared that they regularly go through the bookshops and just 21% declared that they have a reading plan.

70% of university students were confident that books in their classic form would not disappear. From all the sample population just 52% of the respondents declared that they regularly read digital books or articles. We also noticed that „the use of Kindle” is opposite to practices of reading with other handy devices (in fact just 8% use a device like Kindke who is trying to get closer to the printed pages- in terms of brightness and adaptability of the content format). Using other questions, we noticed that a lot of BA students in the last year didn't read/buy any e-Books (36%), they didn't buy audio books (70%), they didn't buy books from virtual libraries (34%) and

so on. However, they are aware of the advantages of using e-Books: accessibility, storage capacity, convenience, low cost, ecological considerations. Even though students believe that printed books are perennial, we believe that reading practices are still reduced, due to the time spent on the Internet and social-networks: 87% of the respondents declared that they spent over two hours a day on the Internet (of which 55% spent over four hours a day) and 71% declared that they spent over two hours a day on social networks (of which 33% spent over four hours a day). The students also declared their reading rhythm: less than five books read in the last year for 41% of respondents. As to reading preferences, the categories were as presented in *Figure 1*. Surprisingly, motivational books constitute the top of preferences (55%) which can be interpreted as a concern of young people regarding the labour market in general and their integration into this market after graduation.

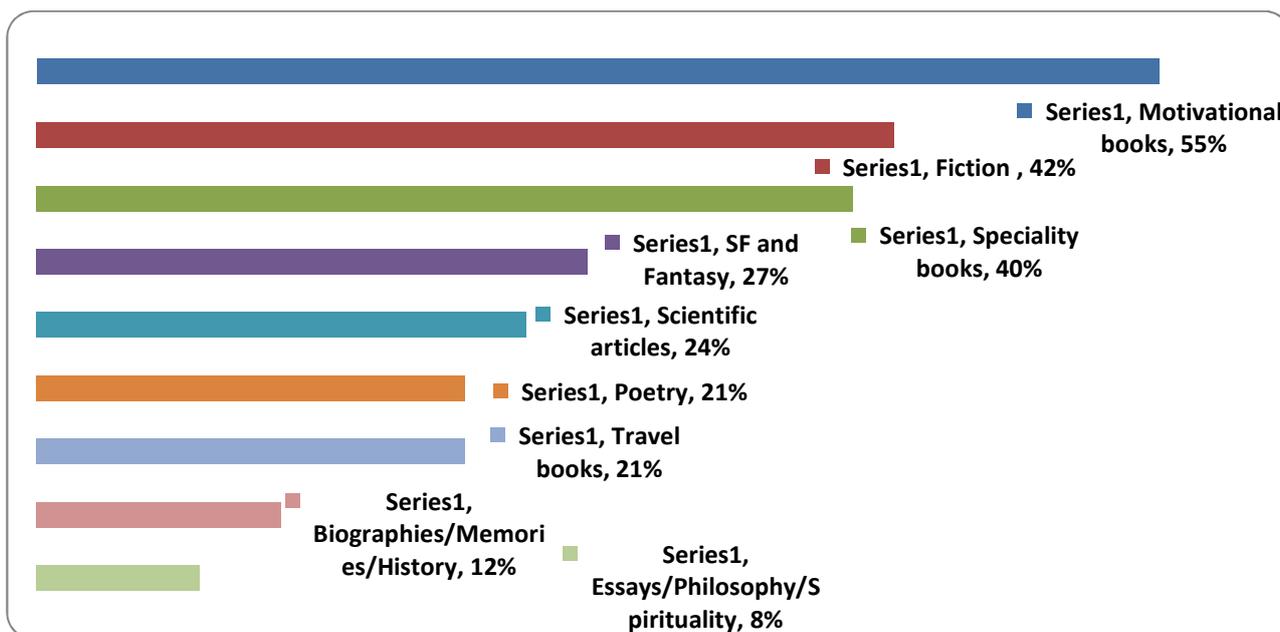


Figure 8. Favorite reading types

Finally, the respondents suggested some strategies to encourage reading: faster access to books in libraries, better supply of libraries, cheaper books (discounts for students), book clubs, courses in schools/ universities about „what and how to read”, Internet restriction (in university campuses), high school reading adapted to current trends, free time for students, events with contemporary authors, presentations of new books on university courses and seminars, PR campaigns to advertise reading.

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All the results of the quantitative research were subjects of discussions between master students. We compared the initial goals of each person with the final research results. Each master student was encouraged to describe all the experiences in the field, all the discussions with other colleagues from university or academic residences that can be important for our research. Each master student received the final database in order to make a short research report from a personal perspective (it was not mandatory to cover all the variables).

After that, all the participants freely organised into 10 new groups in order to create a PR strategy. It is not possible to present all their projects but we can list some titles: „It’s cool to read”, „Change the story!”, „I read for that...”, „Picnic with a book”, „Millennial readers”, „C’mon read, not click!”, „You have a book, you have a piece”, „More than a book”, „Awesome people read!”, „You have the words to yourself!”

In a seminar meeting, each group presented their PR strategy and decided, all together, which was the best of these campaigns. The presentation titled "Millennial readers" was designated as the best PR campaign and we decided that its authors would present the outcome of their work

publicly. This campaign was the best of the entire year because it followed all the stages of a campaign, made an objective SWOT analysis, demonstrated how they got to the slogan and the logo, the established events were designed according to the promotion strategy, the budget - a realistic one and the final evaluation were also included.

In this campaign, the authors emphasized the advantages of reading: an enriched vocabulary, the development of creativity, relaxation and psychological comfort, intense neural activities etc. The authors concentrated on millennial youth (aged between 18 and 24 years old) due to the radical change in their reading habits and the massive digitalization of contents. The authors used all the relevant data from the quantitative research resulting from the applied questionnaires. For the success of the campaign, the authors proposed a collaboration between the National Theatre of Iasi, an advertising agency, universities, media partners (TV and radio), university students associations. The objectives of the campaign were as follows: increasing the number of young readers by 25% in 6 months after the end of the PR campaign; drawing the attention of at least 20% of the target audience on reading issues in the current environment; inform at least 25% of the number of young people in the target audience on the importance of reading at least 2 books per semester as extracurricular materials; create a group of 10% of the target audience attending one specific Internet platform about reading at least once a month; enhancing the visibility of the campaign; presence in the media of 10 relevant news related to the campaign, both during the project (10 October - 10 December 2017) and later in the follow-up period (11 December - 22 December 2017); exposure of 65% of the total target audience to campaign actions (messages, events). Some of the specific strategies proposed were: events in public spaces, video mapping, remodelling several pedestrian crossings, personalized urban public furniture etc. In this way, young people could be surprised by the different actions of the campaign and later influenced to change their behaviour in any way they wanted.

#### 4. Conclusions and discussions

Our application had three main objectives: the complex implication of the master students in a didactic project (*participatory action research*), the public presentation of the results (*returning of inquiry findings*) and proposals to persuade the target population to change behaviours (*public relations campaign*). Finally, in a public conference held in the presence of university students, we presented our strategy of work called *classroom action research*, the main results of the quantitative research and the PR campaign that was designated as being the best. All other discussions at this event were very animated and there was a suggestion for a research on a representative sample selected from all five universities in our city.

The best PR campaign, *Millennial readers*, was combined offline with street events with a fairly strong impact, and the students provided visuals and graphics for what the advertising materials would look like. The purpose of the campaign was to encourage reading among young people and for this, the students made SWOT and PEST analysis to see exactly how they can improve reading and which strategies they can adopt. The slogan was *Never stop reading!* At the end of our application we found changes of attitude and approach among the participants in the research: they proposed to extend the sample in the future, to apply other qualitative research techniques and of course they intend to extend the research to general cultural consumption among university students.

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