

# Content Analysis: Students Discover Trends and Issues

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Motivating students to immerse themselves in the professional literature is sometimes difficult. Content analysis, "a research method that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text" (Weber, 1990, p. 9) can provide the catalyst that leads students to explore and study the literature and is applicable to all disciplines. The purpose of this article is to discuss briefly content analysis and to describe a successful content analysis project used with graduate students to promote discovery of trends and issues in professional journals.

As a research methodology, content analysis is not new. "Empirical inquiries into communications content" were used in the late 1600's by the Church when its leaders were worried about nonreligious messages in newspapers. As a term, content analysis is only about 50 years old; however, it did not appear in Webster's Dictionary of the English Language until 1961 (Krippendorff, 1980). Content analysis has been used most in the social sciences but its value in studying symbolic phenomena is rapidly spreading to other disciplines.

Weber (1990) gives several purposes, advantages, and issues of this investigative approach. Purposes include: disclosing/comparing differences in communication content, coding open-ended questions in surveys, detecting the existence of propaganda, reflecting cultural patterns and describing trends in communication content. Advantages include: operating directly on human communication, using qualitative and quantitative operations on text, generating data from documents that span long periods of time, and assessing change through unobtrusive measures. Issues include consistency in classification, appropriate use of simple and complex techniques, computer options, and interpretation of findings. Experts agree that there is no right way to do content analysis. The most important principles are clearly to define/explicate your procedures and consistently follow them.

The basis for our project came from a text previously required for one of the master courses, Trends in Educational Technology 1995 (Ely, 1996). This small monograph details the methodology and identifies trends found in 1,200 instructional technology documents (journal articles, conference proceedings, dissertations). We adapted the process (See steps below), and made it an assignment in the beginning courses of both our Instructional Technology Masters and Curriculum and Instruction Doctoral programs. IT and C&I students have found content analysis to be challenging and rewarding. Because

they enter our programs from a variety of disciplines, the project allows them not only to broaden and deepen their knowledge of trends and issue in their own field, but also to learn more about those of their peers. Following a group practice session in class, each student conducts a study of one approved journal. Upon completion, they present their findings to the whole class. Below are the adapted procedures that we used:

## Steps for Content Analysis of Professional Journals Project:

1. Select journal: Identify a journal in your field, preferably one you do not read regularly. Secure access to at least 12 consecutive, current issues.
2. Select trends: Brainstorm a list of trends you expect to find in the journal. Narrow your list to 4-5.
3. Identify recording units for each trend: Recording units are terms or themes that would be associated with a trend, terms that would fit under the trend. Limit recording units to ten or less per trend.
4. Define recording units: In order to make consistent judgments about where articles fit within the trends you identified, definitions for the recording units are necessary.
5. Read articles: Skim each article in your journals to determine appropriate recording units within it. You may decide to adjust trends and/or recording units based on what you discover in this step.
6. Record trend(s) for each article: While reading/skimming the article, use a recording sheet to keep a record of each unit and trend found in each article.
7. Compile the results and graph the findings: After totaling the units recorded for each trend, produce a graph using PowerPoint.
8. Summarize each trend to be included in your content analysis report: Prepare a written summary for each trend, including references to specific articles to support trends.
9. Write content analysis report: Include journal title, description, a list of the issues used, summaries of each trend, graph of results, recording unit definitions, and references of articles surveyed.

Used as a course assignment, content analysis projects can be satisfying for both instructors and students. Whether they analyze historical documents, current newspaper articles, or highly technical scientific reports; whether they use a simple human coding scheme or an elaborate computer analysis; students reap benefits from the process and the product. They increase their knowledge and skills in research and in their discipline.