

Community-Based Research Methodology for Emergent Practice-Based Questions

Introduction

This protocol provides a systematic approach for research problems that cannot be adequately addressed through singular methodological approaches. It is designed for questions embedded in continually changing real-world contexts, particularly those involving individual or small group activity, cultural and/or socially constructed practices, and applied contexts where both the problem and appropriate value criteria emerge through investigation. In many ways, it can be viewed as a formalisation and systematisation of a larger scale research culture and landscape. Macro-scale research policy and agenda setting has tended to be top-down and competitive because it works around medium and large-scale projects that require more or less extensive and centrally allocated funding. Nevertheless, it is about establishing a 'big picture' strategy and marshalling resources and researchers in ways that address multiple aspects of a problem. This protocol aims at establishing a mechanism to facilitate a collaborative approach to this kind of strategic planning. Going beyond the crowd-sourcing of data that global communication technologies have facilitated, it is designed to enrol a global research and research-practitioner community into the wider process of setting the research agenda, establishing the context, designing the methodology and methods, conducting the experiments and/or gathering the data, processing and analysing that data, interpreting it and finding uses for the new knowledge that emerges. This methodology has emerged out of the worlds of practice research, autoethnography, artistic research and research creation because they are areas of applied practical research that have embraced the knowledge creating potential of unique case studies and subjectivity. In addition, practice research is very often a solitary or small scale, and also often an unfunded or self-funded, activity. The protocol has emerged from the establishment of the 21st Century Music Practice research centre where this method of inviting multiple approaches to research problems from an international community was at the core of the structure and strategic planning.

The method prioritises external validity (real-world applicability) over internal validity (controlled conditions). Unlike traditional research that treats problems as static entities to be solved, this methodology recognises that:

- Research problems evolve as understanding deepens
- Real-world phenomena continually change
- Value criteria for judging results emerge from diverse contexts
- Multiple valid approaches can coexist for different contexts

Key distinction: This methodology is suited to research aimed at helping individuals express themselves in cultural contexts, rather than research solving technical problems with definable endpoints. There is no 'solved' state as such, but rather an ongoing development and refinement of understanding across varied and changing contexts.

Materials

- An initial articulation of a general research problem (subject to refinement)
- A publishing platform such as the protocols.io workspace for protocol publication
- An individual or team that can collate and select appropriate ways to represent the various 'data' in the form of evidence, opinions, proposals, theoretical or ideological positions and findings in ways that are accessible to the relevant community.
- Capacity to engage diverse researchers/practitioners across different contexts
- Resources for commissioning/conducting multiple discrete research projects, although a key feature is likely to be the focus on the everyday creative activity of researchers and research-practitioners (and thus needing very little in the way of resources)
- Infrastructure for ongoing synthesis and discussion (e.g., online platform, regular convenings)

Methods: Three-Phase Cyclical Process

This methodology operates as a continuous cycle rather than a linear process. Phases may overlap, and earlier phases are revisited as understanding develops.

Phase 1: Collaborative Problem and Sub-question Development

Purpose: Invite diverse perspectives to refine the research problem and generate multiple approaches. Recognise that the initial problem statement is provisional and will evolve.

Step 1.1: Stakeholder Identification and Invitation

Identify and invite relevant parties who bring different perspectives, work in different contexts, or represent different participant demographics. Include practitioners, researchers, and communities affected by the research problem.

Step 1.2: Problem Refinement

Through collaborative discussion:

- Examine why the problem is multivalent (multiple valid framings exist)
- Identify what matters in different contexts and for different participant profiles
- Refine or reframe the initial problem statement based on these perspectives
- Acknowledge that the problem will continue to evolve as real-world conditions change

Step 1.3: Sub-question and Approach Generation

Collaboratively develop multiple sub-questions that:

- Address different aspects of the problem, OR
- Approach the same aspect from different disciplinary/methodological perspectives, OR
- Explore the problem in different contexts and/or with different participant demographics or identities

- Can be addressed through specific, bounded research projects

Step 1.4: Scope and Value Criteria Discussion

Gather input on:

- Appropriate scope for different approaches
- What constitutes 'success' or 'valuable findings' in different contexts
- How to balance breadth (multiple contexts) with depth (rich understanding)

Note: *Value criteria will continue to emerge in Phases 2 and 3. Initial criteria are provisional.*

Step 1.5: Contextual Scoping

For each sub-question, identify multiple distinct implementation contexts varying by:

- Participant profiles (experience levels, disciplines, cultural backgrounds)
- Environmental conditions (institutional, geographical, resource availability)
- Cultural, social, or technological contexts

Step 1.6: Research Project Protocol Development

For each viable sub-question / context combination, create a specific research project protocol or identify an existing one, including:

- Participant recruitment criteria
- Task specifications
- Timeline
- Data collection methods
- Link to this parent lateral methodology protocol

Phase 1 Deliverables: Refined problem statement, multiple sub-questions, contextual matrix, individual research project protocols published on protocols.io (or equivalent) with DOIs

Phase 2: Distributed Implementation and Data Gathering

Purpose: Execute research projects across diverse contexts, gathering evidence while remaining attentive to emergent insights that might reshape the problem.

Step 2.1: Parallel Implementation

Researchers/practitioners conduct their specific research projects according to published protocols. Projects run in parallel and/or sequentially, allowing diverse approaches, evidence and interpretations to develop.

Step 2.2: Documentation of Context and Process

Beyond standard data collection, document:

- How contextual factors shaped the research process
- Unexpected findings or emergent patterns
- Ways the initial sub-question needed adaptation

- Participant responses that suggest new dimensions of the problem

Step 2.3: Interim Communication

Researchers share preliminary findings and emergent questions with the wider group, enabling cross-fertilisation of ideas during implementation rather than waiting for completion.

Phase 2 Deliverables: Context-rich datasets from multiple research projects, documentation of process adaptations and emergent insights

Phase 3: Synthesis, Discussion, and Problem Evolution

Purpose: Bring together findings across contexts, invite external perspectives, refine understanding of the problem, and establish the basis for the next cycle.

Step 3.1: Cross-Case Comparative Analysis

Analyse patterns across implemented projects:

- Which approaches worked under which conditions?
- How did participant profiles and contextual factors interact with methods?
- What boundary conditions emerged for different approaches?
- Preserve variation rather than averaging results—understand how context shapes outcomes

Step 3.2: Convening and External Perspectives

Bring researchers together (physically or virtually) to:

- Present and discuss findings
- Invite practitioners, stakeholders, or researchers from other fields to offer perspectives
- Explore implications for practice in different contexts

Step 3.3: Problem and Question Refinement

Critical ongoing activity: Based on findings and discussion:

- Revise the overarching research problem to reflect new understanding
- Identify new sub-questions that emerged from the research
- Recognise dimensions of the problem not visible at the start
- Respond to how real-world practices/contexts have changed
- Update value criteria based on what the research revealed

Step 3.4: Knowledge Synthesis and Publication

Produce outputs that:

- Document the current state of understanding (not 'final answers')
- Show how approaches perform in different contexts
- Enable practitioners to pattern-match their situations
- Point to open questions and directions for future investigation

Step 3.5: Cycle Continuation

Return to Phase 1 with refined problem, new participants/contexts, or new sub-questions. The process is continuous—each cycle builds on previous understanding while adapting to changing real-world conditions.

Phase 3 Deliverables: Comparative analysis documents, revised problem statements, updated protocols, publications for practitioner communities, identification of next cycle priorities

Data Analysis Principles

Analysis in this methodology differs from traditional approaches:

- **Preserve variation:** Understand how context shapes outcomes. Even where there may be highly common, often seemingly ubiquitous, factors, always explore and document outliers and exceptions
- **Multiple validity frames:** What counts as 'valid' may differ across contexts and participant groups
- **Emergent criteria:** Value judgements develop through the research, and are not predetermined. The emergence of what constitutes a 'good' result is part of the research process.
- **Pattern recognition:** Identify when approaches work and when they don't, not whether they work universally
- **Practitioner utility:** Enable others to match their context to relevant findings

Expected Outcomes

This methodology produces knowledge of a different type from traditional research:

- A collection of linked protocols addressing a problem from multiple angles
- Rich contextual understanding of how approaches perform in different settings
- Evolving problem statements that track real-world changes
- Comparative datasets enabling pattern-matching by practitioners
- Collaborative research community engaged in ongoing dialogue
- Social structures capable of finding general features across diverse individual approaches

Important: There is no 'solved' endpoint. The methodology produces ongoing understanding that develops as contexts and practices evolve.

Ethical Considerations

All research projects must comply with relevant ethical guidelines and obtain necessary approvals. Particular attention should be paid to:

- Power dynamics in collaborative problem definition (whose voices are centred?)
- Informed consent when research problems may evolve during investigation
- Appropriate credit and recognition for distributed contributions
- Cultural sensitivity when operating across diverse contexts

Troubleshooting

Issue	Solution
Problem definition remains too vague	Broaden stakeholder input in Phase 1. Vagueness often indicates insufficient diversity of perspectives, not inherent problem with the question.
Sub-questions overlap excessively	This may be acceptable if overlap serves different contexts or participant groups. If not, revisit Step 1.3 to ensure each addresses genuinely different aspects or uses fundamentally different approaches.
Findings don't converge	This is often the point. Divergent findings across contexts are valuable data about contextual variation. Focus analysis on understanding why approaches differ, not forcing convergence.
Problem keeps changing too much	This may indicate the problem is tracking real-world changes appropriately. Document the evolution—this is valuable knowledge. If it suggests fundamental instability, consider whether the problem needs reconceptualising at a different scale.
Pressure for 'final conclusions'	Frame outputs as 'current state of understanding' with clear pointers to open questions. Emphasise practitioner utility of contextual knowledge over universal claims. See Notes section on structural challenges.

Notes

Methodological positioning: This protocol represents a parallel structure to traditional scientific/social science methods. It is not a replacement but an alternative suited to different types of research questions—specifically those embedded in changing cultural contexts where individual expression and contextual variation are central concerns rather than variables to be controlled.

Structural challenges: This methodology operates uneasily within current research funding models, which typically:

- Require precisely defined problems and endpoints at the outset
- Fund individual institutions or small consortia rather than distributed networks
- Value convergent findings over useful contextual variation
- Struggle to evaluate research without definitive conclusions

Independent grassroots research centres operating outside traditional institutional structures may be better positioned to implement this methodology, as they can:

- Sustain ongoing investigation without fixed endpoints
- Coordinate distributed researchers across institutional boundaries
- Prioritise practitioner utility over traditional academic metrics
- Respond flexibly to problem evolution

Broader applicability: Although developed for practice-based research in music and creative arts, this methodology has potential application to:

- Post-colonial approaches to education and research
- Complex logistical problems approached by diverse individuals/communities
- Business practices in varied cultural/economic contexts
- Any field where individual expression, cultural context, and practical application intersect