

# Personal logs – diaries, log books, reports

## Overview

Using documents as sources of data is a common social research method. Personal logs specifically require a respondent (e.g. a project stakeholder) to record activities they are engaged with. Personal logs in any format that are kept throughout the course of the project provide evidence of personal development, behaviour, thoughts and feelings.

The structure can vary from unstructured or open-ended, where the respondent can write in their own words, to highly-structured tick-box questionnaires. This can be textual (book, report, online), audio or image (photographic or video) based. For instance, providing respondents with a portable voice recorder or camera means that they can be asked to capture the day-to-day experiences of a project.

## Why use it?

Personal logs are particularly useful for evaluating the impacts of projects/activities that focus on individual, personal development, for example, projects that aim to increase knowledge and skills.

The method is useful to obtain real life accounts about certain activities or behaviours that might normally be inaccessible. They can be useful to capture information that may be forgotten in an interview or focus group.

Diaries, reports and logs can provide powerful stories and narratives of certain activities. They can also be very useful tool for the respondent; providing an opportunity for them to reflect upon an activity.

## Instructions for use

- Personal logs can take many shapes and forms. Personal logs may be open format, allowing respondents to record activities and events in their own words, or they can be highly structured where all activities are pre-categorised. Whatever format is decided, be clear on what you want the respondent to log in their diary or book, use the introductory session as an opportunity to set out an example of what you want to see on each page.
- Personal logs will not be appropriate for all activities – they are particularly useful as a means to evaluate long-term projects focused on personal development.
- Agree on how regularly you want the respondent to fill in a personal log (e.g. daily, weekly, at the end of a project) and a final date for submission.
- It is important to encourage honesty and ensure confidentiality.

## Who to use it with

Personal logs, such as diaries, reports or books, work best with staff and participants directly involved in the project.

## When to use it

The diary or log should be kept throughout the life of the project. Reports can be completed at the end of the project.

## **Limitations**

- Personal logs are unpredictable; some respondents will provide more information than you anticipated. However, some might be brief and uninformative.
- These types of methods can require significant time and effort from the respondent. What is required and expected of the respondents should be made clear from the outset.
- The value of the information gathered in the personal log depends on how truthful it is. Those who agree to keep diaries or logs, or supply reports, must be encouraged to be truthful at all times.
- Ensure confidentiality. If people want to share their progress with others they can, but some might feel intimidated if their progress is common knowledge.
- Do not forget time to build in time to sufficiently analyse the information collated. Diaries, logs or reports have to be thoughtfully examined and carefully analysed.

## **Considerations**

It may be necessary to be discrete with the content of the personal logs where possible, especially if you are collecting and analysing sensitive and personal information.

If you are collating any personal or sensitive information, you may need to assure respondents that their responses will be kept confidential. You may also need to declare the collection and storage of any personal data (i.e. information about a living person by which that person can be identified), under the Data Protection Act. More information on this matter can be obtained from your department's data protection officer and <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/efd/recordsoffice/data-protection/>

There are ethical considerations with this method. Although unlikely, if something gets revealed in a diary or a log where the respondent is thought to be at risk, it is important to report it, to your line manager.

## **Timing**

The time needed to undertake this method is difficult to assess; you will need to build in time at the beginning of the project to brief those taking part on how to keep their log, and time will be needed at the end to analyse each diary, report or log book.

## **Link with other methodologies**

While the personal log will give you hard facts about how the project impacted on individuals, a few semi-structured interviews can be useful to validate and corroborate some of the information with individuals who have produced them.

## **Further Reading**

If you are interested in finding out more, below are some examples covering both a background and application of the method:

Latham, A. R. (2003) 'Research, performance, and doing human geography: some reflections on the diary-photo diary-interview method', *Environment and Planning A*, **35(11)**, 1993-2017

Using Diaries in Social Research: <http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU2.html>

Bryman, A. (2004) *Social Research Methods*, Oxford University Press: Oxford

Denzin, N. K. and Lincoln, Y. S. (1994) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA

## Example 01

The example below is the UCL Public Engagement Beacon Bursary: Project Evaluation & Learning Form. The form aims to provide a simple way to document what the project has done and achieved. Projects leaders are asked to self evaluate by reflecting on their experience, explaining any problems they had, summarising what they have learned, and by identifying lessons they would pass on to other projects or can be applied elsewhere. Although a template is provided, the nature and scope of the form depends on the project undertaken.

Projects leaders are asked to submit a complete project evaluation and learning form no later than one month after the project end date. The form is reviewed by the UCL Public Engagement Unit and summarised to the Steering Group.

### Background:

<b>Name</b>	
<b>Job Title/Course</b>	
<b>Organisation/Department</b>	
<b>Project name</b>	
<b>Total project value (£)</b>	
<b>Beacon funding (£)</b>	
<b>Funding breakdown</b> <i>Please note the project actual spend, broken down into specific costs</i>	
<b>Location</b>	
<b>Start and end dates</b>	
<b>Project partners</b> <i>(Please list the partners involved in the project, include names, organisations and contact details where appropriate).</i>	

### Summary of project / activity: What happened?

### Who was the audience for this project? Please give details.

**What was the project supposed to accomplish?** *Please outline the aims and objectives agreed at the start of project, note if they changed during the project and the process and reasons for making those changes.*

**Did the project succeed in its aims? How do you know?** *Specifically, please outline any evaluation and assessment undertaken.*

**What things do you think worked well and why?** *When filling in this section, please try to think about all aspects of the project (e.g. initial inception, project activities and project outcomes), from a range of perspectives.*

**What problems emerged during the project and how were they tackled?** *Specifically, what barriers did you face and how did you overcome them? Again, please try to think about all aspects of the project, from a range of perspectives.*

**Looking back, what things do you wish you had known when the project started?** *Please list anything you feel would have been helpful to know at the start which could have made the project easier.*

**Has the project led to any new activity or relationships?** For example has the project led to any changes within the department or any changes in teaching or research? Please give details.

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**Which of the Beacon aim(s) did it address?** The aims for the Beacon for Public Engagement Programme are as follows:

Create a <b>culture</b> within HEIs and research institutes and centres where public engagement is <b>formalised</b> and <b>embedded</b> as a valued and recognised activity for staff at all levels and for students	
Build <b>capacity</b> for public engagement within institutions and encourage staff at all levels, postgraduate students, and undergraduates where appropriate, to become involved	
Ensure HEIs address public engagement within their <b>strategic plans</b> and that this is cascaded to departmental level	
Create <b>networks</b> within and across institutions, and with external partners, to share good practice, celebrate their work and ensure that those involved in public engagement feel supported and able to draw on shared expertise	
Enable HEIs to test <b>different methods</b> of supporting public engagement and to share learning	

**Specifically, how does the project addresses these aims?**

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**More information:** Please attach photographs of what happened, if you have one. Please also list any titles or links to more information on the project (for example reports, articles, websites).

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