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# Using progress logs to research the information behaviour of higher education students in prison

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## Abstract

**Introduction.** This short paper introduces 'progress logs', an adaptation of the solicited diary method, and details their planned use in a forthcoming study on the information behaviour of students in transition from prison to higher education.

**Development of the method.** Progress logs are designed to capture individual-level qualitative data over a period of time, using prompts which build on previous prompts to generate rich data, allow opportunities for participant reflection and provide a narrative of progress.

**The study context.** The suitability of this method for studying the behaviour of individuals in transition is evaluated. Details of the proposed study are provided, including consideration of sampling, recruitment and ethics.

**Application of the method.** The application of the progress logs method to the study context is described, covering the duration, frequency of prompts and choice of topics.

**Strengths and limitations.** The strengths and weaknesses of this method are evaluated. Despite sharing some of the drawbacks of the solicited diary method, progress logs also build on their advantages to build a narrative of change over time.

**Conclusions.** It is concluded that progress logs offer a suitable means to gather in-depth data about individuals' information behaviour, especially during transitions.

## Introduction

**This paper outlines a** research method designed to evaluate the information behaviour of prisoners released on temporary licence during weekdays to study at a local university. These students face unique challenges, distinguishing them from other students on their courses and from those studying via distance learning while incarcerated. While they may travel to campus to attend lectures and use the library, restrictions remain: they must surrender their laptops at the prison gates and are prohibited from possessing smartphones. The researcher is interested in how they experience the contrast between a closed, restricted, risk-averse and largely paper-based prison environment and the more open, collaborative, exploratory and technology-focused environment of a modern university campus, and how this might influence their information behaviour. These environments can be viewed as two different information landscapes (Lloyd, 2006) or information worlds (Burnett and Jaegar, 2011). This work also draws on prior studies investigating the information behaviour of particular groups in transition (e.g. Bronstein, 2018; Ivins et al., 2016; Kennan et al., 2011; Ruthven, 2021).

The study's primary research objectives are to:

1. Critically explore the experiences of this group around information access and use;
2. Understand the development of individuals' information skills as they progress through a semester;
3. Evaluate the support provided by academic libraries to this group.

The focus of this paper is on the method conceived to investigate this transition. Progress logs are introduced as a tool developed from the diary method (Bartlett and Milligan, 2015) to investigate changes in information behaviour during a transition.

## Development of the method

### Research philosophy

The research approach is grounded in the interpretivist tradition that social realities are multiple and contested (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). While incarcerated people may have shared experiences, every life journey is unique. Each will have a different perspective on their current position as student-prisoners and on the information worlds that they encounter, influenced by these prior experiences and the sociopolitical systems that surround them.

The prison is a small world by design, with clear distinctions between insiders and outsiders (Chatman, 1996). Yet, as Burnett and Jaegar (2011) highlight, no small world is entirely isolated. Prisoners are already affected by political, social and legal structures, and universities have their own social and professional norms. What happens when the small world of the prison collides with the world of the university, and the larger universe of academic information that students must navigate? The proposed method is designed to capture resulting changes in information behaviour.

### Solicited diary method

The researcher originally designed the study to use the solicited diary method, and this remains the foundation on which the methodological adaptation is based. Milligan et al. (2005) noted that the solicited diary method supports participatory research with vulnerable groups by allowing participants to choose and review what they share and assign their own meanings and weights to events. They are written in the context of the phenomenon being studied, improving recall accuracy (Kara et al., 2015), and allowing researchers to indirectly 'observe' events (Kenten, 2010). This last point is particularly relevant when participants return to a restricted environment.

Solicited diaries can be structured, semi-structured or open-ended (Bartlett & Milligan, 2015). Highly structured formats tend to be used to collect quantitative data, such as medication usage. Less structured formats are used for qualitative information, such as recording a participant's recollections of events

and related feelings. Prompts can be offered by the researcher in semi-structured formats. Examples of the use of solicited diaries in information behaviour research include Lee et al. (2012), Tang and Oh (2020); and McClinchy et al. (2022).

The ideal study duration and frequency of entries have been debated. Short durations risk being unrepresentative, while longer durations can lead to respondent fatigue (Keleher and Verrinder, 2003). McClinchy et al. (2022) requested a daily log kept over four weeks, while Milligan et al. (2005, p. 1889) found that '*carefully monitored, diary methods can also be used successfully over relatively long periods of time with completion on a weekly rather than a daily basis*' and that a longer completion period reduced self-consciousness about the activity over time. The study's context is also relevant. In this case, it makes sense to solicit diary entries over a 12-week semester, when students are actively working on assignments, striking a balance between the above positions. This duration also allows a variety of information-seeking events to occur.

### Progress logs adaptation

The progress log method that will be used in this study has been developed by the author from the solicited diary method (Bartlett and Milligan, 2015). In part, this development was driven by necessity, prompted by initial scepticism of the diary method on the part of gatekeepers to the research population. In the UK, any research with incarcerated people must be approved by the National Research Committee (NRC) of His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS). Feedback on the initial application suggested that the NRC were uncomfortable with the open-ended nature of the planned approach.

Access to vulnerable populations is a continually negotiated process, requiring the application of *ethics in practice* as well as the *procedural ethics* of gaining approval through formal processes (Roberts and Indermaur, 2008; Umamaheswar, 2008). Pragmatism and flexibility are necessary in these circumstances. The adoption of progress logs as an alternative

data collection method reflects this, but it also has multiple methodological advantages.

A single progress log is a form of semi-structured diary prompt. A topic is chosen by the researcher to contribute towards the achievement of the research objectives, and a selection of relatively open-ended questions enable the exploration issues pertinent to the topic. Connecting prompts together offers opportunities to create a narrative. This should be of practical benefit to participants, allowing them to reflect on how their skills have evolved during the semester, capturing a moment of transition. The innovation here is in the way that the series of prompts are designed to build upon each other to capture a narrative of progress over the study period.

## The study context

### Transitioning to the HE information landscape

In many ways, the *information landscape* of Higher Education is unfamiliar to all new students, who must learn to navigate this to succeed. This includes the '*established methods of information production, reproduction, circulation and modes of access*' that Lloyd et al. (2013, p. 122) identified as key to social inclusion. This academic landscape '*has not been created through [the students'] own efforts and contains many unfamiliar resources, discourses and connections*' (Whitworth, 2020, p. 145). This is especially true for students from non-traditional backgrounds, such as mature, first-generation and disadvantaged students, and can be exacerbated by perceived differences from classmates and faculty, such as belonging to a minority ethnic group, or having a disability. Minority groups are over-represented in the prison population (House of Commons Library, 2023; Ministry of Justice, 2012).

There is a growing pool of research on the information practices of individuals in transition. The most comprehensive is arguably Ruthven's (2021) information behaviour theory of transitions, since it synthesises a wide range of studies which consider various circumstances in which people might embark on a transition. Ruthven's theory represents

three main stages of information behaviour in the transition between someone's *life before* and *life after*: understanding, negotiating and resolving. These three stages are 'characterized by qualitative differences in the psychological states of the individual undergoing the transition and that are reflected in the information behaviors that occur at that stage' (Ruthven, 2021, pp. 584-5). The process is punctuated by actions that progress and consolidate this process. The broad topics revealed by Bronstein's (2018) literature review – sources of information, specific information needs of the population, and barriers faced – have all inspired specific questions and themes that run through the series of progress logs. Other work that has informed this study includes Ivins et al. (2016); Kennan et al. (2011); and Lloyd et al. (2013), particularly in expanding the scope of questioning to include informal interpersonal sources. Canning and Buchanan (2019) also emphasised the importance of informal information sources. In this study, this might include the transfer of tips about university life between successive cohorts of student-prisoners.

### **Sampling, recruitment and ethics**

Since the cohort is so small (there is funding for up to 10 students), sampling criteria are simply that participants are housed in prison and in their first year of a programme of study on campus. Since it is a men's prison, most participants are anticipated to identify as male. Based on previous cohorts, ethnic and age profiles are expected to be diverse.

Access to this population is facilitated by my membership of the prison-university partnership steering group. I deliver bespoke Library tours to groups of incoming students from the prison. This also offers an opportunity to introduce my research and invite them to participate. However, this also complicates perceptions of the researcher's identity; while acting as a representative of the university I work for, I must reassure them that their confidential contributions will not be shared with colleagues and strive to minimise power imbalances as far as possible. This is similar to a potential conflict referred to by Bronstein (2018), who volunteered with a service used by

participants before inviting them to be part of the project. Clear role boundaries are important here, as well as reflection on the part of the researcher about my position as a university *insider*, but a prison *outsider* (Chatman, 1996).

Past incidences of the exploitation of prisoners for unethical research have prompted understandable caution; yet, it has also been convincingly argued that denying prisoners the opportunity to participate in research that could benefit them is also unjust (Moser et al., 2004; Chwang, 2010). In this case, participants have the capacity to participate in higher education and are thus assumed to be in a position to be able to give informed consent, to be obtained in writing before data collection commences. However, it is crucial that participants understand that their decision on whether to participate will not affect their academic progress or prison 'privileges'. Further, the researcher intends to ensure that participants are actively involved in shaping the research, for example through informal catch-ups during the semester to gather feedback, and that their (anonymised) voices are heard.

### **Application of the method**

This section will describe the operationalisation of the progress logs in the context of the planned case study.

The progress log prompts are designed to explore the extent to which these phases of transition occur during the students' first semester of study. The prompts follow this trajectory, but do not assume that all students will understand, negotiate and resolve their new student identity within this period. New prompts are shared with students each week, and they have a week to complete these before the next prompt. For example, in week 1, students are asked why they chose the course, what information they had before enrolment, how they obtained this information, and what they are looking forward to. Weeks 2-11 visit and re-visit questions related to assignment-based information searching, use of libraries before and during their studies, information technologies, and informal information exchanges with other students and staff. As in

Lee et al. (2012), some questions focus on specific information encounters or searches. Sample weeks are included in the appendices. These demonstrate appraisal of and reflection on an information-seeking challenge, helping to show how students might be adjusting to their new information environment and providing opportunities for continuous reflection.

The topics are informed by the researcher's understanding of the different milestones achieved by students during a semester. This is helpful for studying transitions, since it tracks common experiences during a semester (e.g. settling in, receiving and completing an assignment) while capturing each participant's individual responses.

Students will be offered the option to return their completed logs electronically, using secure technology available to them at the university, or by hand.

Finally, participants will be invited to one-to-one interviews, in which the issues raised in the progress logs will be explored further. These interviews will also allow participants to raise issues not covered by the prompts, offering another opportunity for reflection and diminishing the potential effect of researcher bias.

## Strengths and limitations

Progress logs are presented here as a valuable method of data collection during a transition. Some of the advantages derive from the solicited diary method outlined by Bartlett and Milligan (2015). Solicited diaries and, by extension, progress logs allow data collection where the researcher lacks consistent access to participants, and are suited to research with vulnerable individuals since it puts them in control of information sharing.

Soliciting diary entries for a clearly explained purpose is less ethically problematic than exposing unsolicited diaries to the public gaze (Milligan et al., 2005). However, McClinchy et al. (2022) and Brownlie (2018) found an *observer effect* whereby some participants reported changing their behaviours to provide the data that they believed the researchers sought. Attempts to counter the *observer effect* should

involve reassurances to participants about the purpose of the study, for example that even recording that something did *not* occur is useful data, and awareness on the part of the researcher at the data analysis stage. Tang and Oh (2020) identified some other potential disadvantages of using solicited diary entries, including dependence on participants' communication skills, commitment levels and understanding. Some of these potential issues can be mitigated by providing sufficient instructions and regular reminders to participants (Keleher and Verrinder, 2003). For this research, it will be important to convey the value to students of engaging in the exercise for their own reflective purposes.

The progress log method has the further advantages of allowing a narrative of progress to build up over time and incorporating opportunities for the participants to reflect on the process. However, it's recognised that a linear narrative of *progress* may not fit every individual's experience. As Ivins et al. (2016) highlight, the effects of a transition can vary significantly between individuals. Lloyd et al (2013, p. 138) also provided evidence that transitions are likely to be 'cyclical and iterative' rather than strictly linear. As Ruthven (2021) highlights, few transition models acknowledge that transitions also require maintenance in order to *stick*, and it is acknowledged that a progress log duration of 12 weeks may not fully capture this process.

## Conclusions

Progress logs are presented as a useful tool for exploring the information behaviour of individuals in transition. With their origins in the solicited diary method, progress logs share many similar advantages, such as capturing information in context, close to events, and allowing participants to assign their own meanings to the data. They also share some disadvantages, such as the possibility that the act of recording may alter behaviour, and low commitment and respondent fatigue on the part of participants. However, progress logs have further benefits in the context of studying information behaviour during a transition, since the series of semi-structured prompts are designed to present a record of an individual's

development and responses to a transition. Solicited diaries are an under-used tool in information behaviour research, and the progress log method may increase the relevance of this approach to the discipline.

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## Appendix I - Three sample progress log prompts

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study.

Please remember that this is *your* progress log and you are free to write about your university education in a way that makes sense to you. You can write as much or as little as you wish.

It would be helpful if you could write about the topic suggested this week, but you do not have to respond to every prompt and you can add other information that you think might be relevant.

### Week 1 topic and questions

To begin with, please think about how it feels to be starting your university course, and the information you received before you started.

Here are some initial prompts for you. You can add any other details that you think are significant.

- Can you briefly explain why you decided to study at university? Why did you decide to apply for this particular course, and did you know anything about the subject before you started?
- How did you get information about the course? Did you talk to staff or other students? Did you read about the course in brochures or other documents?
- What are you looking forward to in the coming semester?

### Week 3 topic and questions

Think about an assignment that you have been given for your course. What kind of information do you think you will need to complete the assignment? How will you find it?

Here are some initial prompts for you. You can add any other details that you think are significant.

- Please start with a brief description of the assignment – what have you been asked to do?
- What kind of information do you think you will need to answer the assignment question(s)? For example, books, journal articles, news, reports etc. Which will be important for this assignment?
- Where do you expect to find this information? How will you search for it? Please be as specific as possible and give details of e.g. databases or search engines you could use, keywords you might try or people who you might ask for help.
- How will you be able to tell if the sources you have found are credible/good quality? Have you been given any guidance on this?



## **Week 8 topic and questions**

Please think back to the assignment you wrote about in week 3. (If you did not complete that week's entry, please choose any assignment you have been set).

Here are some initial questions for you. You can add any other details that you think are significant.

- What kind of information/inspiration have you used for this assignment? This could be more formal sources like journal articles, books, reports, sources of data or code, or simply anywhere that you've got inspiration for the assignment (websites, magazines, conversations etc). Please list anything you can think of!
- Did you search for specific information? How easy was it to find what you were looking for?
- Did you encounter any information by chance? If so, how did you make use of it?
- Did you encounter restrictions relating to how, where and when you were able to access this information? If so, how did these restrictions affect your completion of the assignment?
- Was there any information that you would have liked to use but you couldn't find it or didn't have access to it?