Developing and Refining a Research Question

When beginning any research project, the first crucial question is “How can I refine my topic of study into a question that is answerable within the scope of the work I am doing?”

The process of developing a research question is really quite simple. First, ask yourself what question you need to answer to find out what you need to know. For example, if after reading the literature you have come to believe that asking students to engage in peer mentoring will increase their engagement, you might wish to ask this research question:

*Does peer, student mentoring increase student engagement?*

This is your tentative research question and you want to answer it “Yes” or “No.” The next step is to ask “What questions need to be answered to answer the research question?”

For example, here are a few.

- What would peer-student mentoring look like in your situation?
- How can you best measure student engagement?
- What kind of data can I collect? When should I collect that data?
- How much data is enough?
- Who should I ask? [who knows the answers?]

It is always wise to talk through your research project with another trusted peer. But, once these questions have been laid out and you have a picture [for teachers, a lesson plan] of the steps you will take to complete your research project, you will have developed and refined your research question and have gone a long way towards figuring out what methods you will use to conduct your study. These steps are crucial because a solid research question is at the heart of every research project.

A good research question is always (a) carefully phrased; (b) stated clearly, (c) complete, (d) precise, and (c) represents the goals of the research project. Other important considerations include (a) feasibility [Can the study be done?] and (b) validity [If the study is completed, will it tell us what we need to know?).

When you are fine-tuning your research question, work to do the following things: (a) delimit the research [make sure the scope of the research project is manageable], (b) define the terms [not all research projects define terms exactly alike – as noted above, peer-student mentoring might be done differently in different situations - what do terms mean in your situation?], and (c) question the question.

Questioning the question means that you must analyze and evaluate your research question. Is it the right question? If you are successful in answering this question, will it give you the information you need to make positive changes? Is there a better question to ask and answer? Finally, as noted earlier, be pragmatic: “What questions need to be answered to answer the research question?”

*If you can answer these questions about your research question, you are on your way towards having a solid research project.*