

Managing constraints

Case study

Case study research is a form of qualitative research that is focused on providing a richly detailed account of one or more *cases* – an experience, idea, interest, question, person, or whatever you're investigating. The case itself sits within a "**bounded system**" (Creswell, 1998, p. 61), a set of self- or other-imposed constraints that are necessary for both creative thinking and intuitive decision making.

By definition, artistic disciplines are practiced within carefully organized frameworks of **domain- and project-specific constraints**. The work may *appear* to be free-wheeling self-expression, but on the whole it exists within complex arrays of socially negotiated relationships, formal and informal business practices, cultural features of institutions or companies, and a host of other interdependent variables and limitations.

Constraints – whether in the form of aesthetic criteria, maker strategies, or knowledge bases – essentially act as funnels for inspiration, forcing divergent ideas to converge into choices that eventually form (or are made into) the creative product.

Selection and maintenance of high variability through the use of **constraints** . . . [is] common in highly creative individuals.
(Stokes, 2001, p. 357)

Boundaries

In the theatre, the artmaking process is bound by rehearsal schedules and performance calendars; the individual imagination is bound by the demands of collaboration; creative teams are bound by workplace circumstances and presented textual and technical problems; and the entirety is bound by budgets, time, skills, context, and expectations.

However, the artist-scholar feels these constraints nurture rather than suppress creative convergence, supporting the gradual distillation of many personal visions and processes into one vision and one process that guide and filter the artistic intuitions of all members of the production team (Tate, 2007).

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It is up to the artist-scholar (individually or in concert with a creative team) to identify and determine not only the **boundaries of the cases** but also the **rules of the world** she's creating (Fuchs, 2004). Rules comprise the logic, the practical rationale that guides sampling, collecting, selecting, and working with the **data corpus** (Creswell, 1998).

- **How much** will she adapt or edit primary texts?
- **Where will she find** interstitial materials and texts? Will they come from primary or secondary sources, or will she write or improvise them?
- Are the primary texts **inviolable**?
- **How will she balance** exposition, enactment, embodiment, and other approaches to presenting personal stories (i.e., interviews, diaries, letters, etc.)?
- **Will she devise** using a single narrative voice, composite characters, multiple distinct personas, or a mix of "true story" and imaginative reconstructions?
- In terms of the data corpus, **what is "enough"**?
- **Will the production aesthetic** draw on specific exemplars from the research or merely reflect some aspect or other, whether complementary or contradictory?

Constraints aren't completely virtuous, although there are virtuous aspects to having constraints. Too many constraints and you've got paralysis. It's a continual dance with one's self. Just trying to dream the dream, trying to allow yourself to be free to be as imaginative as you can be given the resources at hand. – *A Designer*