The NCRM quick start guide:

Teaching social research methods asynchronously online – guiding principles

The COVID-19 outbreak has prompted a major shift from face-to-face to online teaching, including of research methods. Much of this is asynchronous. Asynchronous elements can include pre-recorded content, discussion boards, assessment activities and collaborative spaces, which can be combined in different ways, and with synchronous sessions. Teaching social science research methods online presents pedagogic opportunities and challenges that involve teachers adapting and transforming their teaching. The community of inquiry model[1] provides a helpful tool to thinking about adapting and transforming the teaching of research methods to an asynchronous online learning space. This guide considers the three elements of the model and shares examples of how methods teachers adapt and transform their teaching to students in asynchronous online contexts. It supports the view that 'There are many ways to get it right online'[2]. The guide is based on NCRM research with online methods teachers and learners, involving interviews, observations and analysis of course documents.

Generating social presence

Social presence is concerned with supporting learners in projecting themselves as 'real people'. Creating social presence is important in supporting learning and involves creating a safe environment in which learners can authentically engage in activities and dialogue. This can be challenging in the asynchronous online learning environment, where visual cues to socio-emotional states are limited. Online learning environments often lack the functionality of social media platforms that afford social presence[5]. There are different things online methods teachers do to create safe learning environments in which learners can support each other as they learn how to be researchers. These include:

- Introducing yourself to learners at the start of the course and telling them about your research background and interests.
- Asking learners to introduce themselves to each other and to you. It can be helpful to suggest what to include in their introductions. Also think about the form introductions might take: e.g. a post to the course forum, a blog or vlog and whether to offer learners a choice.
- Getting to know your students is particularly important if you value a student-centred approach. Include opportunities to find out more about their backgrounds, research interests and plans, such as though one-to-one and/-or small group interaction e.g. via email, synchronous tutorials or seminars.
- Using encouraging and supportive language; starting communications with a greeting; acknowledging learner difficulties with content and its application in the real world; being empathic to the wider challenges your students face; and providing positive, constructive feedback help to create a respectful, supportive learning environment.
- Encouraging learners to interact through activities that involve collaboration and peer assessment. Support learners in undertaking these activities by providing instructions, pointers and ground rules.

Generating cognitive presence

Cognitive presence involves supporting learners in their construction of meaning through dialogue. Central to the learning of social research methods is the development of the 'internal speech and reflective thought'[3] that supports much methodological decision making. In the online environment, as in the classroom, teachers engage students in activities that help learners make connections between theory and practice. These activities support active learning that encourages learners to think about what they are doing and why they are doing it. Engaging learners in dialogue around these activities develops their thinking further.

However, this is not straightforward in the online, asynchronous space[4]. Methods teachers think about their students when considering the kind(s) of interaction and dialogue they want to encourage and how to support this. Dialogue might be internal to the learner, and/- or involve peers, the teacher, and the wider world. It may form part of an assessment. The form of dialogue will be shaped by the eLearning platform used and its functionality. Here are some of the ways online methods teachers generate cognitive presence:

- Setting tasks that encourage personal reflection, e.g. getting learners to create a situational map of the factors that may shape their (planned) research project. In producing their maps ask learners to consider specific issues.
- Setting tasks that require students to post their answers to the course forum, making them visible to the teacher and other learners. For example, find out whether a country has a census, how to access the data, and how it measures particular concepts.
- Setting tasks that involve preparation for synchronous discussion (e.g. in an online seminar). For example, review two articles and listen to a podcast, reflect on the similarities and differences in response to issues raised and make notes.

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- Setting tasks that involve learners collaborating with each other. For example, teacher sets up a wiki page that learners can use to create a glossary into which they can add terminology they are unsure of and define it for each other.
- Giving students the option of posting questions, posting responses to practical tasks and/or using their own preferred digital platforms to support collaboration and/or interaction.

Teacher presence

Teacher presence involves planning and organising sessions and facilitating learning, to translate pedagogic goals into actions. In an online asynchronous environment planning is particularly important as there are fewer opportunities to dynamically respond to learners and the challenges they face once the course is underway. Anticipating learners' challenges is important. Here are some examples:

- Setting clear expectations for learners in terms of learning goals, course participation and behaviour provides clarity.
- Demonstrating or walking through the steps involved in using a method, providing a range of worked examples or model answers to support learning. Use the affordances of the online learning environment to provide learners with support at a distance, for example by providing video and or text instructions and exercises that students can complete at their own pace and can return to.
- Providing additional resources that deepen learning, e.g. open access articles, videos, podcasts, online research projects with accessible methods and data.
- Linking theory to practice. For example, including video/audio of researchers talking about the research challenges they faced and how they negotiated these, providing opportunities to practice, including practice in writing about methods, critiquing others' research.

Although asynchronous learning takes place at a distance it is important to think about how learners will be supported throughout the course. Learners may need technical support so that they can (continue to) access the course. They will also need support with the learning of research methods. This could be provided by you, teaching assistants and/or- peers.

Being responsive to learners' needs during the course by providing support, answering questions and providing feedback in a timely way supports cognitive and social presence. There are various ways in which methods teachers can be responsive and project their presence.

- Encouraging students to post questions about methods to the course forum rather than email the teacher, so that other students benefit from seeing the question and can share their knowledge and experience.
- Using the online forum to learn more about the level of difficulty students can handle, adjusting the pitch and pace of the course to the variation in learners' disciplinary backgrounds.
- Making use of the online learning environment's quiz functionality to provide immediate feedback to learners on their understanding of e.g. key concepts and processes. This can help identify misunderstandings of foundational concepts.
- Including peer assessment, where students comment on each other's responses to a task, e.g. questionnaire design, can provide an alternative to teacher feedback. Provide students with guidance on what to look for and on the importance of providing constructive feedback.

Useful links

The NCRM quick start guide to: Teaching advanced research methods http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/3746/

The NCRM quick start guide to: Teaching research methods online http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/4246/

References

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This guide is part of a series produced as part of research for the Pedagogy of Methodological Learning Project. Look out for them on the NCRM website. We also appreciate feedback to inform future work.

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