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Real Research

Research training in a 'real-life' survey

Summary

A whole course or module is built round a survey research project devised in collaboration with a partner agency which may be an outside body (e.g. local government) or a unit in the teaching institution (such as a research group or the library). Other elements of the course/module, such as methodology, may extend and qualify understandings gained through the project.

Aim To learn about research methods by undertaking a class research project.

Objectives To improve relations with outside bodies, to utilise their expertise and knowledge, to gain access to research areas where they are gatekeepers and to obtain financial assistance from them to facilitate the study.

Skills development o Some of the work is carried out in task-oriented small groups so students learn about effective co-operative working methods.

o Practical training for students in all aspects of the survey process including:

- questionnaire design
- interviewing
- coding and data entry
- computerised statistical analysis
- reporting the results.

o To introduce students to word processing (e.g. Word 5).

o To introduce students to computer-data analysis (eg. SPSS-PC).

Designed for Students in their second or subsequent year of study in Higher Education.

Class size 12 - 25 (Maximum depends on staffing but it may get difficult to manage when numbers are significantly greater than 25)

Number of sessions This depends on the length and intensity of the course. For example, at least three hours a week would probably be required for a 10 - 15 week course/ module.

There need to be different types of session according to the activity and phase of the project - such as planning the survey, data entry, computer analysis and report writing.

Duration of sessions 1 - 3 hours per session

Description Undergraduate students enrolled in the Research Methods course in the Department of Sociology at the University of Aberdeen receive practical training in all aspects of the survey process through participation in a collaborative survey research project. The project can be in-house or with an external agency.

The idea behind this approach is threefold:

- Institutions of Higher Education are more and more pressing for outside (realistic) input into the institution.
- Students receive research training in a 'real-life' survey.
- The outside body brings in certain resources the teaching institution cannot always provide, such as organisational skills and expertise in the field of research, and possibly some financial support to conduct the survey. In return the partner agency gets a survey done which it might not otherwise have been able to afford and has the data analysed in a more detailed and sophisticated way.

This project covers the whole of the practical part of the Research Methods course. Other parts of the course cover other methodological approaches and a critique of survey methods.

The survey is set up in such a way that the students are involved in all stages of the research - from sampling, questionnaire design and piloting to interviewing, data mounting and analysis. The fact that students are working on a real survey helps to keep them interested in an aspect of sociology which does not always engage student interest. We have found that, compared with previous years when there was no concrete focus for skills development, students show much more interest in the actual course and the survey topic.

Room requirements A classroom with computers: either PCs or terminals connected to a mainframe computer. Ideally each student should have access to his/her own computer, but we found that two students sharing works well and leads to some cooperation.

Equipment required Appropriate software (eg. MINITAB or SPSSx).

Resourcing Facilities for production and, possibly, mailing of questionnaires.

Staff preparation Initial contacts have to be made with the partner agency and preliminary joint-planning carried out. The project needs to be planned ahead to cover the whole period of the course/module. The partner agency has to be willing to adapt to the teaching requirements and time-tabling of the course/module and to nominate a person to liaise with the teachers. The survey will probably take longer under this arrangement than if the partner agency were to contract out the research to a commercial organisation.

Pre-briefing

- The seriousness of the commitment required of the students should be stressed. and the importance of their role in all stages of the research should be clearly indicated.
- The method of assessment for the course work should be made explicit.

Student preparation A useful text is D. A. de Vaus (1990) *Surveys in Social Research*, Allen & Unwin. Students could profitably read the chapter pertinent to the phase of the project at appropriate points in the course/module.

De-briefing Preparation of the survey report for the partner agency and its distribution to students. A final evaluation meeting should include discussions about the complexity of the research process, and the strengths and weaknesses of the particular survey and survey methods used. Students should be made aware of other research methods in order to avoid over-generalisation on the basis of a single research project.

Other comments

- The great merit of this approach is that it is 'real' research and gives students an overview of the whole research process, warts and all.
- Firm agreements must be made at the outset about the ownership of the final data. It should be available to the teaching institution, the partner agency and all those who cooperated in producing the data by agreeing to be interviewed. Clearly, there should be respect for the principle that participation be voluntary on the basis of informed consent and that it is inadequate for the partner agency to agree 'on behalf' of its clients or employees for interviews to be conducted. It is important that legal and ethical issues are addressed explicitly with the students and that reference is made to ethical guidelines. (See the BSA guidelines reproduced in *STH*.)
- Only projects which give educational value and which are non-controversial should be selected. Students may still object that they are being used as cheap labour, or that they do not approve of the work of the agency or the possible uses to which the data collected in the project may be put. (If funds are available payment can be made for conducting interviews and mounting data.) The likelihood of such objections depends upon the partner body as well as the nature of the project, and it is not unreasonable for teachers to state a case to students as to why they should participate in the research. The educational value of participating will be recognised by students and the ethical

issues raised will help students to think about the implications of 'doing' research. However, objections from students must be respected and, as a last resort, an opportunity for opting out of the project and engaging in alternative work without prejudice to their academic record should be offered.

- The work of all stages of the project is shared equally among the class members. Bear in mind that at any one time students will be missing classes (for whatever reason), and arrangements should be made for these students to be covered by others.
- Assessment of students can be based partly on individual contributions to the research project. For example, each student can be made responsible for interviewing a number of respondents, coding questionnaires, mounting data etc. and these steps can be monitored and assessed. Further assessments can be made through exam questions or essays based on the research project.

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An earlier version of this contribution appeared in *Computer Education*, Nov. 1992