

# NCRM Bitesize Lessons for Teaching Social Science Research Methods

## 3: Learning from learners

### What do teachers tell us?

It is clear from the scholarly work on teaching research methods that teachers/trainers often favour student-centred learning approaches<sup>1,2</sup>. Student-centredness involves working with and valuing learners' own experiences, knowledge, and expertise, thereby making the learning personally relevant and learners more motivated<sup>3</sup>. In this way they learn better, make cognitive connections, and develop as learners and people. This reflects a concept of students as knowledge-producers who need to be engaged in creating their own knowledge through inquiry and dialogue<sup>4</sup>. For this, learners need to work both independently and collaboratively<sup>5</sup>.

Methods teachers may choose student-centred learning as an efficient way of working<sup>6</sup>. Bell<sup>3</sup>, for example, argues that ownership of learning and research projects makes learners better able to defend and justify methods. Student-centredness in methods learning may take the form of student-led inquiry, working with data in their own fields, shared learning logs, and exercises to personalise new knowledge.

### What do learners tell us?

In the early work raising awareness about the lack of attention given to research methods pedagogy, Earley<sup>7</sup> found little in his systematic literature review to portray what student learning of research methods looks like. In a more recent NCRM review of the literature on teaching research methods<sup>8</sup>, we did find data on learning and learner perspectives. While this was mostly filtered through the lens of teacher-researchers, learners of research methods have been co-authoring papers and providing useful messages for teachers and other learners<sup>9,10,11,12</sup>.

In the qualitative methods' class described by Bogumil et al.<sup>9</sup> students regularly sat in a circle to discuss their research topic, process and perspectives. They would work on identifying and appreciating their own

paradigmatic and theoretical viewpoints before ultimately sharing their research in a creative way. The teacher was interested in their reflections on the role of their personal biographies, identities, assumptions, and behaviours in their research process. We hear from the learners about, for example, using video-based reflexivity to support them to revisit their thoughts, emotions and perspectives when seeking to understand methodological challenges and navigate ethics in practice. The authors conclude that: 'As teachers and learners, using art as mode and medium to share and express the various aspects of our research process brought our inner thoughts, feelings and perceptions to the forefront of our consciousness. This process allowed us to share our research with one another in a more creative manner that enhanced dialogue, learning and critical reflection.'

Similarly, in research by teachers and learners about using arts-based techniques in learning qualitative research, Chatfield et al.<sup>10</sup> found that students appreciated the way arts-based techniques helped them to visualise and enact their researcher roles. They found that this added depth of understanding, helped to address the stress of being new to the ideas, and supported them in making connections.

Learners tell us what learning research methods is like for them. In another example, a tutor and two doctoral students<sup>11</sup> describe how students grappled with learning participatory action research while working with their own research agendas. They analyse course participants' journals for moments of understanding and to see how students experience the teacher's student-centred style. There is a key lesson from this: students may be intimidated by the idea of leading their own research projects, but in finding their way through by putting into practice concepts, readings, reflections, discussions and hands-on activities in enacting the approach they gain confidence in it.

Providing more of an overview, Nind et al.<sup>13</sup> recorded and analysed learning journeys in understanding and applying methods from learners' perspectives. The

learners involved spanned varied stages, paradigms and methods. Some headline messages from their diary longitudinal circle include:

- Learners benefit from hearing how more experienced researchers applied methods, ‘the real crux of learning’ being listening to those who have used the methods and can ‘identify the pitfalls’ so that their narrative experiences become a resource.
- Peers, who share genuine interest in each other’s research, provide critical learning and emotional support; it is sometimes better to learn from fellow students who help close the knowledge gap or to solve problems and practice together.
- Practical application of the methods is essential for ‘real learning’, as is deep reflection.
- Learning comes from actively *doing* things, particularly doing things with data and even more so ‘data that actually matters to me’ and that ‘I have a stake in’.
- Presenting work in progress provides valuable learning through the necessity to recap and communicate the research to others.
- Like teachers of methods, learners of methods value visual metaphors and non-technical language for making concepts comprehensible.
- A high point of learning is seeing the beauty of the methods and feeling a ‘deep personal connection’ with them.

## Applying what learners tell us (and student-centredness)

Research that values what learners bring to the pedagogic encounter and that enables us to see the methods learning challenge from a learner’s perspective provide an aide memoire for methods teachers. We do well to remember that:

- Methods learners are not empty vessels to be filled with knowledge. They bring valuable experiences and knowledge on which to build. Finding out about learners is a worthwhile investment of time.
- Methods learners have their own values and standpoints, but like methods teachers, they may need to be engaged in activities that bring these to the surface<sup>14,15</sup>. Discussions, reflexive exercises, using metaphors and arts-based techniques, role playing and presenting to others all help.
- Methods learning can be emotionally challenging as well as exhilarating<sup>16,17</sup>. We need to acknowledge the range of emotions that are evoked and facilitate

learners in reflecting and supporting each other. Being open about our own emotions and vulnerabilities in research<sup>18</sup>, fieldwork diaries, group and pair work can be helpful.

- Methods learning is enhanced by learners having an investment in it and working in student-centred ways helps – addressing their own research problems, working on their own data, making and justifying their own decisions.

## Useful links

[NCRM Bitesize Lessons for Teaching Social Research Methods. 1. Active Learning.](#)

[NCRM Bitesize Lessons for Teaching Social Research Methods. 2. Experiential Learning.](#)

## References

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