

Teaching social research methods online

Teaching social science research methods presents a number of pedagogic challenges – diverse learner groups, structuring and sequencing content, and the practicalities of handling data. When research methods courses are taught online these challenges take on additional dimensions. This guidance speaks to these challenges and is based on findings from NCRM research involving interviewing and observing online teachers, learning technologists and online learners of social science research methods. This guide is designed to help teachers navigate pedagogic decisions by sharing insights from teachers who teach research methods online. It is intended to stimulate debate and the development of good practice.

Design for diverse learner groups

Learners of research methods often come from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, with varied experience, skills and expertise in any given method¹. This can present challenges for online research methods courses, in anticipating students learning goals and in deciding how teaching and learning activities are designed.²

●●● in advance

Help prospective learners choose the course that will meet their needs and expectations by explicitly stating the aims of the course in promotional material, what it will cover, what time commitment is required, and what prior knowledge is assumed. In addition, explicitly state what language the course will be delivered in, and the level of language proficiency required. Specify technical requirements, e.g. hardware and software needed. If there are synchronous sessions, provide details of when these will take place and make clear any expectations regarding attendance. Collect information about students' prior knowledge, skills, language competence and current research interests as part of course registration.

Provide introductory and background materials and references to support diverse learner groups, for example, those who may have been out of academia for a while or who are new to research methods, as well as for learners wishing to develop their knowledge in a particular topic. Provide preparatory and follow-on material e.g. references, articles, video links, to provide more depth on foundational ideas and concepts. You may also consider including sessions on practical issues e.g. obtaining ethical clearance, which may resonate with your audience. Check and promote the accessibility of all the materials you share to ensure all learners can access them irrespective of disability or the use of assistive technologies.

●●● during the course

Asking learners to introduce themselves to each other through an online forum or course chat space at the outset provides an opportunity for you to find out more about them, and for learners to get to know each other. Giving learners a list of points to include, e.g. prior research experience, current research interests, what they hope to get out of the course can be helpful. Consider including activities that involve students posting or blogging about their answers to questions you set and commenting on each other's posts. Such activities create opportunities for peer learning and make use of expertise in the group.

Synchronous sessions can be used to identify areas where learners need additional support and to signpost students with particular interests to relevant resources.

Structure and sequence course content

Online research methods courses need careful and transparent structuring and sequencing to ensure that stated learning goals are achieved and learners are engaged. There are fewer opportunities for spontaneity in online research methods teaching. The tacit knowledge you may convey in a traditional classroom as you talk around your slides (e.g. about your experience of using a particular method, the problems you faced and the trade-offs you considered) needs to be explicitly woven into the structure and content of your online course.

●●● in advance

Give time to planning the course structure and sequencing. Highly structure course content to manage learners' linear progression through underpinning theoretical concepts and practical application. Make the structure visible and clear so that learners know what to expect, can assess their progress, and plan their study time accordingly. Think about managing learners' cognitive load by chunking material and providing clear, explicit instructions. If your course involves learning an analytic method or software then consider walking students through the process, making the code available, and explaining the rationale and theoretical underpinning of the methods being used.

Decide whether you will use video as well as text for asynchronous sessions. Think about different forms of video (e.g. expert talking head, research in action, animation) to bring abstract concepts to life.

Adding synchronous elements brings students together for particular activities or tasks. Synchronous activities provide opportunities for students to discuss theoretical and practical research issues and offer opportunities to tailor content to students' research interests. However, they rely on everyone being able to dial in at a set time and you and the students need to be confident in the technology.

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Seek advice and input from learning technologists and colleagues who have taught online before, who can help you choose learning technologies, chunk and sequence material, and with synchronous elements.

●●● during the course

Sequence course content to keep learners' engaged by mixing up formats: e.g. text, video, narrated slides and screencasts.

Learners appreciate visual feedback on their progress through the course. Consider including questions and automated quizzes throughout so that learners can check their knowledge, reinforce their learning and get feedback on how their understanding is developing.

Including activities early on can help engage learners. Activities can involve background reading, critiquing a research study, designing a data collection strategy or considering the ethical issues involved in undertaking research on a particular topic with a particular population.

To identify and meet individual students' learning needs, and to check learners' understanding consider offering one-to-one tutorials (using video conferencing), and/or online office hours when students can contact you with questions or issues they want to discuss. Consider using the online forum to ask questions of your learners, prompt, probe and engage them in dialogue. Be aware that students may be reluctant to use the forum and you may need to model forum use. Incentivising its use, e.g. the earning of additional learning hours credits can be helpful.

Promote learning through use of data

Social research methods learning involves not only theory but practical application through the gathering/generation, handling, analysis and reporting of data. Data are used by teachers to engage learners and to facilitate learning. The use of data in the online teaching space is particularly challenging and requires significant investment in planning, learner support and technical resources.

●●● simulated data collection

Getting students to generate their own data can help them to appreciate the interconnections between theory and practice. However the ethical issues that can arise when students are asked to collect data unsupervised mean simulated data collection is more appropriate for online courses. Planned activities to generate data can include learners being asked to design a questionnaire or qualitative interview guide asynchronously on their own

and then interview a tutor using it synchronously. Provide students with clear, step-by-step instructions on what they are required to do, issues to consider and reflect on, and how they are to give feedback on their experience. Students can be asked to reflect on how they thought the interview went, on what they have learned from the process that is applicable to their own research, either synchronously with the tutor who acted as the interviewee, or asynchronously through a forum post or blog.

●●● using teaching datasets

Using teaching datasets in online courses can help ensure the dataset can be made available to students, is of a suitable size and complexity, and is free from ethical issues. Decide whether students will work with data and software that they download onto their own devices or whether they will work with it virtually.

When analysing data, provide clear step-by-step instructions on the software version to use if students are to download it themselves; how to access/download software and associated datasets or libraries; and the commands to use. Follow-along videos, with the code, can build learners' confidence and develop their understanding of analytical strategies and how to undertake them using the software. Provide step-by-step instructions for activities and get students to answer questions so that you can assess their competence and understanding.

Useful links

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

References

- 1 Kilburn, D., Nind, M., and Wiles, R., (2014) Short courses in advanced research methods: Challenges and opportunities for teaching and learning. NCRM: University of Southampton. <http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/3601/>
- 2 Laurillard, D. (2012) Teaching as a Design Science: Building Pedagogical Patterns for Learning and Technology. Abingdon: Routledge.
See p.96 Table 6.3 for examples of types of learning and the learning technologies that can support them.

Further guides in this series are in production: Look out for them on the NCRM website. As part of current research on The Pedagogy of Methodological Research (see <http://pedagogy.ncrm.ac.uk>) we also appreciate feedback to inform future work.

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