

## The NCRM quick start guide:

# Planning to teach social research methods online – guiding principles

Deciding on what to teach and how to teach it are important pedagogic decisions at the heart of course planning undertaken by teachers of social science research methods. Viewed through the lens of Pedagogic Content Knowing<sup>1</sup> this pedagogic work involves teachers transforming their subject matter knowledge over time in ways that aim to make it accessible to learners. This transformation of content knowledge is mediated by teachers' knowledge of learners and of the wider context in which learning will take place, for example whether it will take place face-to-face and/or online, synchronously and/or asynchronously. It is also mediated by teachers' values and beliefs<sup>2</sup>. This guide considers aspects of planning to teach social research methods that involve transformation and adaption to the online context, including examples of how online research methods teachers do this. The guide is based on NCRM research with online methods teachers and learners, involving interviews, observations and analysis of course documents.

## Anticipating learning challenges

One way in which online social research methods teachers approach course planning is to think about the challenges to learning that arise from learner diversity and subject matter complexity<sup>2</sup>.

### Planning to manage learner diversity

Social research methods courses attract students from a wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds with varying levels of foundational knowledge and experience. Research methods teachers adopt a range of strategies to manage learner diversity in the online teaching space, including:

- Being as clear and explicit as possible about course content, learning goals, and the target audience;
- Collecting information from prospective students to gauge their level of understanding of key foundational concepts, their interests and or experience;
- Providing participants with pre-course and/or additional material to support understanding of key foundational (threshold) concepts and develop their understanding of the method further. Additional material includes articles, blogs, book chapters, podcasts and videos;
- Incorporating a range of examples and case studies that connect with learners' experiences, interests and backgrounds.

### Planning to manage subject matter complexity

Teachers of social research methods know that their subject is complex and difficult to learn. Learners have

to get to grips with specialist terminology and abstract ideas; they need to make connections between theory and practice. In planning to teach research methods online teachers employ a range of strategies to address these challenges, including:

- Introducing key concepts and ideas using non-technical language;
- Helping students to learn the language of research methods, for example, through designing activities that get them reading about different methods, creating their own glossary (e.g. individually or collaboratively using a wiki), discussing and writing about methods (e.g. posts to the online course discussion board; blogging);
- Segmenting and breaking down complex ideas and processes into small chunks made visible online;
- Using metaphors, modelling thinking, providing checklists and visual representations of e.g. ideas, processes, links between theory and practice;
- Checking students' understanding through use of e.g. the affordances of quiz functionality within the VLE/ video conferencing software, synchronous and/or asynchronous discussion and Q & A sessions, and assignments.

## Anticipating teaching challenges

### Planning how to teach research methods

Planning how to teach research methods online involves teachers in thinking about issues such as:

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where to start; how to manage learners' cognitive load; how to get learners interested and keep them interested (what Lewthwaite & Nind<sup>3</sup> refer to as 'pedagogic hooks'); how to generate dialogue and interaction between learners. Strategies that address these challenges include:

- Starting with a research question, issue or problem, which may be related to the teacher's own research; where the audience will be international, it is important to think about the cultural portability of examples and problems;
- Carefully sequencing material e.g. the progression of ideas, concepts and activities that increases in complexity and builds learner confidence - sequencing and chunking material are complimentary and parallel planning activities;
- Providing learners with opportunities to get hands on with data and with using methods as early as possible - the use of teaching datasets supports this strategy;
- Providing learners with accessible resources such as those that are open source or have been designed specifically for the course;
- Planning activities that involve learners discussing with each other e.g. an issue or problem, answering a question, critiquing a paper, or that involves collaboration e.g. undertaking a research project, peer-reviewing each other's questionnaire.

## Planning the role of e-learning technology

Part of planning how to teach research methods online involves teachers in thinking about what e-learning technology they will use to deliver the course, its affordances and how these can support, enable or constrain their pedagogic goals. Learning technologists can help teachers in this regard. Issues to consider include:

- Whether the course will involve synchronous and or asynchronous elements - synchronous elements can support teacher-centred and collaborative learning but it is important that the technology is reliable and easy to use for both teachers and learners;

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- How the default interface design of the authoring tool/VLE will shape the visual layout and presentation of course pages to learners and how this may support learners in making connections between different topics, concepts and ideas;
- What file formats and links can be added to course pages and whether this has any implications for the kinds of resources provided or how they are to be produced;
- What functionality supports teacher assessment of learners' understanding of research methods and provision of teacher feedback - whether different forms of assessment and feedback are supported;
- What functionality can support the generation of dialogue and interaction between learners and with the teacher and whether this privileges text-based interaction or whether other forms such as voice and visual are possible.

## 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/>

The NCRM quick start guide to: Teaching research methods asynchronously <http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/4287/>

## References

1. Cochran, K. F., Derutier, J. A. and King, R. A. (1993) Pedagogical content knowing: An integrative model for teacher preparation, *Journal of Teacher Education*, 44, 263–272.
2. Nind, M. and Lewthwaite, S. (2018) Hard to teach: Inclusive pedagogy in social science research methods education, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 22(1), 74–88.
3. Lewthwaite, S. and Nind, M. (2016) Teaching Research Methods in the Social Sciences: Expert perspectives on pedagogy and practice, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 64(4), 413-430.

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