



**In the classroom, in the field:  
expert perspectives on the  
challenge of experiential learning  
in advance methods teaching**

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**ABSTRACT:**

There is a considerable consensus that developing the pedagogic culture around social research methods is necessary to the development of that pedagogy (Wagner et al 2011; Earley 2014; Kilburn et al 2014). Dialogue between teachers of research methods is critical to this pedagogic culture, as is the generation of evidence about teachers' pedagogic practices. This is particularly pertinent as the balance of methods education is shifting from students learning through practising as researchers, to more systematic tuition; a shift in part attributable to concerns about global competitiveness demanding a critical mass of highly skilled social researchers (Nind et al, 2015). The research discussed in this paper is an attempt to build pedagogic culture by involving teachers and learners of research methods in sharing and generating pedagogic knowledge through a multi-component study of the pedagogy of methodological learning<sup>1</sup>.

In this paper we focus on one aspect of this work: the pedagogic challenge associated with methods learning that, rather than meeting specific and immediate goals as a researcher, involves learning that is intentional but *unsituated*. This is the learning that takes place out of context, for which the purpose and utility will be known at another time in a remote situation (Crook & Lewthwaite, 2010). Methods teachers are grappling with formal curricula, short courses, international summer schools and the expectation of online courses in which research methods must be taught out of situ while still incorporating the mix of theoretical understanding, skills and procedural knowledge that is particular to methods teaching (Kilburn et al., 2014). In the paper we examine (i) the reflections of social research methods teachers on the particular pedagogic challenges of conveying the implicit and tacit knowledge that are frequently evoked only in the *doing* of research; and (ii) what we know about the role that digital technology plays in tackling these challenges. We draw on data generated from a UK and international expert panel of methods teachers who might be considered pedagogic leaders, focus groups with methods teachers, ongoing diary reflections of methods learners, and an in-depth thematic analysis of the recent literature.

We report findings pertaining to the useful ways in which methods teachers convey and manage the implicit and tacit knowledge that is frequently evoked only in the *doing* of research. This includes the ways in which methods teachers connect learners to the world of social research; how they provide for direct and immersive experiences of research practice; how they value and promote reflexivity; and how they use digital technology in relation to the above.

**References**

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<sup>1</sup> See: <http://pedagogy.ncrm.ac.uk>

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### In the classroom; in the field

1. The challenge of research methods pedagogy
2. How do methods teachers connect learners to the real world?
3. The online classroom / technology as the field

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## The challenge of research methods pedagogy



### Research methods teaching:

'...demands a combination of theoretical understanding, procedural knowledge and mastery of a range of technical skills'

**Kilburn et al., (2014, p. 191)**

'...requires a pedagogy which is completely different from that suited to the teaching of knowledge'

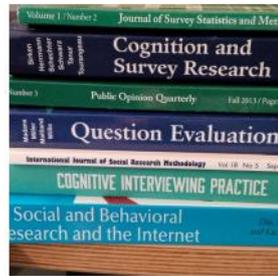
**Bourdieu (1992, p. 222)**

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### Advanced social research methods

- taught (short) courses
- aimed at PhD students & practitioners
- assume prior knowledge
- methods more difficult/innovative



### Tacit knowledge

Perennial problem: Can research methods be taught in abstraction?

Hammersley (2012)

we start thinking with theory [Jackson & Mazzei, 2012], that we don't just do qualitative research as a descriptive project, [...] we also do it as a theoretical project.

it's very clear to me that you can't teach fieldwork methods as a theoretical course [...] my absolute belief [is] that people can't learn fieldwork methods without being in the field.

Yvonna Lincoln

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### Experiential pedagogies

you cannot teach someone to become a qualitative research practitioner, actually to be able to do it and do it well, without them actually practicing ... I feel very strongly that ... we have to get them out into the field. We have to get them generating data, and maybe get them critically working on datasets. We have to get them doing preliminary analyses of data.'

Amanda Coffey

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How do methods teachers connect learners to the real world?



## Pedagogies of Research Methods Teaching

1. Connecting learners to research
2. Learning by doing
  - Hand-on, active learning
  - Problem-based pedagogies
  - **Experiential learning**
3. Reflexivity

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## Connecting learners to research

... I call them 'behind the scenes', and I do this a lot in my methods books, where I interview a researcher and I actually ask them: really, what happened when you were doing this project? ... give me the back-story. Because what we see is the final product, but they [learners] don't understand the enormous journey that researchers go on, the false starts, the stops, the need to regroup, the iterative nature

**Sharlene Hesse-Biber**



## Reflexivity

- Standpoints
- Positionality
- Learning 'the rules of the game within your field'

**(Manfred Max Bergman)**



Image: Pigeons: their structure, varieties, habits & management (1980) Internet Archive



Photo credit: Muhammad\_Ahmeda via Compfight cc

Classroom and field. The situation.

### The online classroom/technology as the field



What digital technologies are being used in the teaching and learning of adv. research methods?

Generic

- VLEs
- assessment tools
- discussion forums
- collaboration tools
- MOOCs
- social media

Specific

- data collections tools
- data analysis software
- data visualisation tools
- online data sets & resources



Are digital technologies enhancing or changing the ways in which advance research methods are taught and learnt?

Connecting to Research	Learning by Doing	Reflection	Additional affordances
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrating techniques &amp; methods</li> <li>• Practising</li> <li>• Testing knowledge &amp; understanding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Designing, collecting, analysing data</li> <li>• Experimenting</li> <li>• Peer review</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using data to discuss theory</li> <li>• Comparing different data sources on a topic</li> <li>• Reflecting on own/others research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collective learning space</li> <li>• Identifying problematic threshold concepts</li> </ul>

## Reflections and ways forward



**NCRM** National Centre for  
Research Methods

### Questions for you

How are you using experiential approaches in your teaching?

How do you balance experiential and conceptual/theoretical work?

How has your use of digital technology in your teaching helped your students' learning?