

NCRM Bitesize Lessons for Teaching Social Science Research Methods



1: Active Learning

What is active learning?

Active learning is an approach that values learning by doing. It involves a mix of doing and reflecting and may be referred to as 'hands on learning'. It requires activities in which learners do things in practical and thoughtful ways so that they actively construct knowledge and build skills.

The underpinning ideas include:

- To learn something we need to experience it concretely and actively, not just abstractly and reflectively
- Applying knowledge in active ways facilitates understanding as well as competence
- The more we do, the more we learn and retain and the more we feel ownership of the learning and appreciate it.

Using active learning in research methods education

In research methods education/training active learning approaches are used alongside experiential learning¹, collaborative learning², problem-based learning³, student-centred learning³, and reflective learning approaches⁴.

Methods trainers and teachers, like teachers in many fields recognise that being 'hands on' enables learners to appreciate and engage with the learning challenge and that it can enhance the pleasure and accessibility of learning methods when the concepts are hard.

The hands-on work of active learning is good for teaching core concepts, using e.g. case studies, practical activities, exercises, group discussions, and simulations. It supports methods learners to gain experience and confidence. Being hands-on consolidates and expands knowledge and its application

in practice. Students become active agents in identifying methodological problems and revising and justifying methods where analytical thinking and informed decision-making are applied.

Active learning is common in research methods teaching and learning in person, in hybrid contexts and in toolkits where learners can work on activities at their own pace. Teachers carefully intersperse being 'hands on' with 'hands off' reading, thinking and reflection².

Active learning in research methods education is particularly valued for preparing students for their roles in conducting research and using data analysis software.

What the pedagogic research literature tells us

Active learning supports methods learners to:

- take measured risks, applying and reflecting on their learning⁵
- know 'what concepts and tools are available, when and where to apply them, and what the limitations may be'⁶
- build practical knowledge using a conceptual framework based on their own experiences⁷
- apply core concepts in exercises and simulations⁸
- consolidate and expand their knowledge and apply it in practice - when learning interviewing¹ or mixed methods⁵
- identify problems, revise and justify methods¹
- gain experience and confidence².

In terms of learning theory, active learning is a good fit with critical pedagogy¹, constructivism^{2,3}, cognitivism³, and sociocultural theories of learning⁹.

Applying active learning

Research methods teachers and trainers apply active learning in many ways, including in the form of:

- learning logs with reflexive exercises⁵
- research journal clubs⁶
- games and simulations^{8,12}
- playful tasks¹⁰
- carefully staged practical tasks¹¹, exercises¹¹, discussions, role plays and group work^{6,12}

Useful links

[Case Studies in Research Methods Pedagogy - Teaching computational statistics through active learning](#)

[The NCRM quick start guide to Three approaches used in research methods teaching](#)

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