NCRM Bitesize Lessons for Teaching Social Science Research Methods

2: Experiential Learning

What is experiential learning?

Experiential learning is rooted in the idea that experience plays a critical role in learning[1]. The core idea is that you learn by doing and by reflecting on that doing. The experience in experiential learning tends to be in an authentic context or, if it has to be simulated, readily translatable to an authentic context. Experiences thus support holistic learning[2] and this kind of learning is often contrasted with more fragmented, classroom-based or textbook style learning.

The underpinning ideas include:

- Learners benefit from exposure to (or immersion in) novel experiences and real-world problems that make the learning meaningful to them. Dialogue with others helps them to make sense of what they are learning.

- To learn something we need to experience it. In experiential learning (rather than just active learning), the learning is grounded in experience in an ongoing way.

- The theory of Kolb[3], that is, that there is a learning cycle involving experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting. In this way the student is able to act on their learning in an applied way.

- The theory of Schön[4] about the need for reflection to inform professional practice.

Using experiential learning in research methods education

Experiential learning is a model that underpinned old-style PhDs in the UK in which the doctoral researcher learned almost as an apprentice – doing research to learn the craft. It is widely regarded as suited to learning to *be* a researcher[5], particularly a qualitative (or mixed methods) researcher[6,7]. Indeed, experiential learning is sometimes seen as the 'signature pedagogy' of

qualitative research[8]. This builds on the ideas advocated by Bourdieu[9] that learning to be a researcher needs to happen in the research situation and not through transmission of knowledge out of context; experiential learning gives the student researcher a feel for the game of research. It provides an embodied experience and draws in learners' emotions and reflections[5,10,11,12] in addition to their judgment and reasoning[7], supporting a constructive process of experimenting[10].

Experiential learning approaches dominate many professional domains such as teacher education, social work and the training of health professionals, with which learning to be a researcher has many similarities. Students are immersed in methodological concepts and tools so as to bring depth of understanding of the processes they use and why[13].

What the research methods pedagogic research literature tells us

Experiential learning supports methods learners to:

- appreciate the process, ethics and decision-making of research[12]
- make personally meaningful connections between content and experiential, reflecting, thinking and acting phases[14]
- experience feeling uncertain and vulnerable in research, which means that often teachers combine experiential learning with collaborative learning to reduce the stress[10,11,12,15, 16]
- enjoy deep learning[12], creating rather than just consuming knowledge, gradually building on prior experiences[14].

Applying experiential learning

Research methods teachers and trainers apply experiential learning by:

- strategically placing students into authentic research projects[17,18]
- preparing students to make sense of their experiences, providing opportunities for dialogue before and after the experience[15]
- starting with giving students a research experience, then using practical tools to systematically reflect on the experience and think critically about it, followed by action in research assignments; this works in online as well as in person formats and in simulated as well as authentic contexts[14,19]
- using drama[20] and other arts media such as poetry, photos, dance and film to enable students to experience working with data and thinking about data in new ways[2,7]
- using virtual environments[21] to provide authentic experiences of interviewing, for example, thereby preparing students for process elements of doing research (how long things take, the unexpected, what it is like to combine giving full attention with planning the next move)[19].

Useful links

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

[Conversation with a Purpose](#), by Helen Kara showing experiential learning on doing qualitative interviewing in comic form.

References

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This resource is underpinned by a systematic review: Nind, M. & Katramadou, A. (2023) Lessons for teaching social science research methods in higher education: Synthesis of the literature 2014-2020. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 71(3), 241-266.