Teaching Sociological methods

Learning through doing

One of the things about teaching research methods – especially in the light of the new (2008) specification where coursework has been removed as an option – is the importance of students actually being able to apply what they learn in the classroom. This involves the opportunity to reinforce classroom learning and develop new insights into research methodology by 'learning through doing'.

We can note a couple of related points here – about activities in general and about research methods specifically. Classroom activities should ideally be short, sharp and simple to prepare and organise. Each activity needs to be reinforced by evaluating the knowledge generated. In this respect, when teaching research methods, there are three basic evaluative areas on which to focus – the process, methods and methodology.

The research process

This includes areas like choice of topic and method, sampling techniques and different methodological approaches. Students should be made aware of different methodological approaches through the distinction between positivism and interpretivism. Other methodological approaches can be highlighted where appropriate – feminist, realist or postmodern methodologies, for example. The objective here is to reinforce the idea of arguments and differences of approach/emphasis rather than to push a hard-and-fast distinction between 'positivism' and 'interpretivism'.

Research methods

The main ideas to reinforce here are 'strengths and weaknesses' / 'advantages and disadvantages'. This is useful because higher mark exam questions generally ask students to evaluate research methods and this is a relatively simple and straightforward way of laying the ground for such evaluation.

Research methodology

Although required knowledge and understanding here is fairly basic and limited at AS-level, it pays to focus students' attentions on four methodological areas.

- **Reliability** – this means understanding what reliability means and how it relates to different research methods.
- **Validity** – you need to ensure that students have a very clear idea about what validity means and involves. In general, students are not required to write about distinctions like internal or external forms of validity (although they are, of course, free to do this) so it's probably best to focus on making sure that they understand this general concept and, most importantly, how it differs from reliability.
- **Representativeness and generalisation** – these are two significant concepts when thinking about sampling procedures in particular, although they can often be applied to the evaluation of different research methods.
- **Problems with research methods** – these include things like observer effects, interviewer effects and common sampling errors.

In terms of specific activities, the worksheets accompanying this pack contain a range of relatively simply exercises that can be combined with other forms of teaching and learning. Given the close relationship between research methods/ methodology and the Education module, it might be useful to look for ways these activities can be orientated towards 'education examples', although this isn't strictly necessary.

There are a range of ways that 'doing research' can be combined with the Education module. They include:

- **Questionnaires** – ask your students to construct and apply a questionnaire/structured interview to research some aspect of education, such as gender differences in subject choice.
- **Participant observation (covert and overt)** – experience of the problems, strengths and weaknesses of this general method can be gathered by getting students to carry out relatively short, simple, safe and ethical studies focused on the school/college or family ('observing family or classroom behaviour over a 24-hour period', for example).
- **Experiments** – although these can sometimes be complicated to set up, there are a few simple experiments that students can carry out as a way of experiencing and understanding the problems that frequently arise in their construction, analysis and interpretation. You can, for example, use the concept of personal space as a basis for a range of simple experiments.

In our culture we feel that we 'own' an area around our bodies and often find it uncomfortable if people 'invade' our space without permission. Using a relatively closed environment such as the school/college library, ask students to: **1**. Systematically observe and record the responses of students whose personal space they deliberately invade, for example, by standing too close to someone looking for a book on the library shelves. Check to see how people of the same and opposite sex react to such behaviour. **2**. Systematically observe and record examples of the ways that people try to protect their personal space in this environment. For example, do they surround themselves with things like books and bags that seek to stop uninvited

people sitting next to them? Place a bag on an empty chair at a desk in the library and observe and record how people respond. Is the response different when the room is relatively empty, or crowded?

When evaluating these types of experiments, it is helpful to ask students to:

- identify any practical problems with the various pieces of research (was there anything that might have biased the results?)
- identify any theoretical problems with the various pieces of research (evaluate the process in terms of its reliability and validity)
- discuss the possible ethical aspects of the experiments.

Although short, classroom-based, activities can make the teaching and learning of 'the research process' more interesting, enjoyable and effective, they mean that students can miss out on the 'nuts-and-bolts' of doing research (planning, organising, interpreting and selecting information, and so forth). One way to remedy this – and provide valuable, first-hand experience of doing research – is to set up a 'long-term' (perhaps for the length of time spent studying research methods) research project for the whole class. Although this can be potentially difficult and time-consuming, it is possible to do this using the device of visual sociology.

Visual sociology

This relatively new research method has a number of different dimensions (see http://www.artlab.org.uk/ for more information and examples). For our purposes, it involves 'painting a visual picture' of the school/college and (if required) its immediate locality. The basic premise here is that 'the research' will:

- engage students in a relatively lengthy research project
- involve them in all aspects of research, from initial choice of topic and research methods through planning and organisation to interpretation, analysis, presentation and evaluation
- provide experience of the problems (and their solutions) involved in the research process
- produce an interesting and valuable piece of research (to decorate the classroom or as part of a wider school/college project) of which your students can claim ownership.

The technique

Research brief

This is deliberately open-ended to facilitate planning and organisation of resources – both practical (time, money, effort…) and theoretical (to understand the problems associated with doing research).

The aim should be to produce a visual representation of the school/college covering as many aspects as possible (both positive and negative). In this respect 'visual' should involve the use of pictorial representations (digital cameras are relatively common, cheap and easy to use) as well as any forms of analysis the students see fit to use (this might involve formal questionnaires/interviews but equally it could involve the 'visual pictures' painted by non-participant and participant observation).

The objective of the research project is to create a final presentation (such as a classroom display, Microsoft Powerpoint® presentation, website or whatever) that paints a 'class picture' of the organisation (school or college) being studied. One way to do this – and provide a way of kick-starting the project – is to suggest that the students should initially focus on gathering visual information about the organisation. For example, this could include walking around the school/college taking pictures that reflect the students' impressions of the organisation, or could involve writing short pieces of 'personal reflections'.

Timing

Aside from some initial class time devoted to explaining the project and initial organisation/preparation, students should be told that they must organise and carry out the work 'outside class time' (although some review points can be timetabled to check on the progress of the project, identify and resolve any problems and evaluate the work-in-progress). These review points are important because they replicate time constraints and provide a focus for organising and carrying through the research work.

Teacher guidance

This will be required at various points although this should be relatively informal (to deal with requests for help, for certain materials or access to particular areas). The teacher needs to stress that the project should be evaluative as well as descriptive (visual). The final report (in whatever form) should employ some – and preferably all – of the research methods covered in class.

Debrief

At the conclusion of the project students should, individually, be asked to write about their experience of 'doing research' – focusing, perhaps, on areas like the problems they encountered and the solutions they created. This will provide a range of 'revision materials' that can be linked into teacher-led summaries of the research process, an evaluation of different methods and research methodologies, and so forth.