

How to Motivate Students to Discuss Research Design

Written by Simon Fink

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SIMON FINK, MAY 12 2016

Most students dread courses on research design. Research design is often abstract, and students fear that the course will be all about statistics. During the course, students are often hesitant to offer their opinion, thinking they might say something “wrong”. However, research design is extremely important. How you choose your cases, how you frame your questions, how you operationalize and analyse your data all affect the answers you get to your research questions. Moreover, being able to criticize research designs of published work, and developing a research design to answer one’s own research questions are key academic qualifications.

Last semester I taught a course on research design. From my predecessor, I inherited the overall course structure. There were class sessions on specific topics of research design, but the core of the module was that students presented the research design of a) an old project (usually their Bachelor’s thesis), and b) of a new project (usually their Master’s thesis). Then, the group was supposed to critically comment on these projects. My concern was that students might agree on a non-aggression pact early on: If I don’t criticize your project, you don’t criticize mine.

I solved the problem by presenting two of my own research proposals in the first session of class: The first draft of my M.A. thesis proposal and the first draft of my PhD project proposal. Both were really awful. And both were anonymized. I just said “Here are two student research designs, what do you make of them? What is good, what can be better?”. Students were happy to tear into both proposals, suggesting that “Student X” does not have a clear research question, has not discussed the literature in an adequate way, does not clearly state his or her hypotheses, and in summary has lots of work to do until the project is doable. The only thing I had to do was to moderate and summarize the discussion (and defend “Student X” from time to time). At the end of class, I revealed that I was “Student X”.

This first session set the tone for the rest of the class. The first session demonstrated:

1. that criticism is encouraged.
2. that I am not the “sage on stage”, but rather that we are a group of peers discussing their projects.
3. that it is not only my job to do the commenting, but, again, that we are a group of peers in which everybody contributes.
4. that everybody get his or her fair share of criticism, but that it is fine to get critical comments.

Of course, there are downsides to the approach.

- You have to dig deep in your old stuff to find some of your early research proposals.
- The surprise effect wears off if word gets around that you are Student X. Without the “anonymous Student X” effect, students might be inhibited to voice their criticism.
- Really excellent students might know your old projects and recognize your proposals.

Still, in the interest of having a lively discussion about research design, it pays off to come down from the “sage on stage” position and show that your own work is not perfect.

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Simon Fink is an assistant professor at the University of Bamberg. His research focuses on the role played by international organizations and the EU in conditioning policy diffusion. His work has been published in the European Journal of Political Research, Comparative Political Studies, Governance, and the Journal of Common Market Studies, among other outlets.