

## Student Centred Learning for Big Qual Methods

**Author:** Sarah Lewthwaite, NCRM.

**Summary** - Advanced research methods are often taught in short, one and two day courses to participants from varied disciplinary backgrounds, methodological traditions and demographics. In this context, it can be difficult to tailor content to meet the needs of these differing (and sometimes unknown) groups, particularly where – as advance learners – they bring their own markedly different learning objectives (Nind & Lewthwaite, 2018). Student-centred learning shifts the focus of instruction from the teacher to the learner, often with a view to developing and recognising learner autonomy and independence. Learners take more responsibility for their own learning path. Student-centred learning can also allow teachers to draw learner's expertise into dialogue, enriching the learning environment and methodological understanding for the group as a whole. In this way, diversity can become a pedagogical asset and more experienced learners can constitute a resource for teachers (Kilburn et al., 2015). Notably, time spent getting to know learners can pay significant dividends in terms of anticipating areas of struggle for those from purely qualitative or purely quantitative backgrounds.

**Learning Outcome** - Learners share their knowledge in class, bringing their understanding into dialogue with teachers and peers. Learners are enabled to undertake activities in pursuit of their own research and learning objectives, in a supported environment.

**Rationale** – Engaging prior knowledge

Peer-learning

Inclusion: The diversity of participants can be a challenge. This approach ensures that diversity is recognised and the teacher can pre-empt and respond to this challenge.

Constructivism / learning by doing: learning occurs as learners are actively involved in a process of meaning-making and knowledge construction, as opposed to passively receiving information.

Scaffolding: the teacher provides sufficient support to help the student master a task of concept that a student is initially unable to grasp independently.

**Level** – advanced quals/quants/mixed-method.

**Setting** – seminar / workshop

**Learning cycles** –

Step 1: Prior to teaching, ensure that course recruitment materials are detailed so that learners are able to effectively self-select onto the course. Actively manage expectations, state difficulty, necessary pre-requisite skills and course content. It may be necessary to ask prospective students to state their interest in the course prior to registration, to ensure recruitment materials have been understood by those new to the method.

Step 2: Following registration and prior to teaching, use a short online survey to gain a sense of learners, their backgrounds and their learning objectives. This, and information gleaned on the day (see steps 3 and 5 below) allows teaching to be tailored more effectively for different audiences.

Supporting resource: Example of [informal training needs survey](#) shared with participants in advance of teaching. Example of [covering email](#).

Step 3: As learners arrive for the workshop, informal conversations can be important for getting a sense of participants and their interests.

Step 4: Share the schedule for the teaching, so learners can assess where they are within the structure and sequence of the days' events [see also: '[Structure and Sequencing](#)' teaching resource].

Step 5: At the start of teaching, use questioning and a show of hands, or other mode of learner interaction, to discover the skills and interests of those in the room in a way that is visible to the class as a whole.

Step 6: Early in teaching, engage with the critical and cultural dynamics of big qual analysis to equip learners with the critical faculties to reflect upon their own positionality in the use of data. This could be done whilst conveying a rationale for the use of the method, or beginning upfront in discussion of ethics prior to learners accessing an archive.

Step 7: Allow participants to undertake activities in ways that reflect their own interests. For example: In the Breadth and Depth Method teaching, several activities are purposefully structured to take advantage of student interests and research objectives.

a) '[Searching for relevant data on the UK Data Service site using Discover](#)' is a browsing activity that encourages learners to use search terms that they have derived themselves (as opposed to search mandated by teachers) into *Discover* to explore and search the archive.

b) '[Constructing a corpus](#)' (p2) encourages learners to consider the questions that they might ask of a data set and to begin applied thinking about metadata with a view to beginning this process.

Step 8. Give time to discussion – to allow learners to consolidate what they have learned, to check understanding, question and share their own insights.

Step 9: Recognise the importance of peer-to-peer learning interactions in the process of the workshop. Many advanced methods learners choose face-to-face teaching over online courses to gain time with experts, to network and to become part of a learning community. Interactions in and around the course will be valued.

**Designer's Reflection:** There are several challenges when using student centred learning methods for teaching big qual analysis. First, the teaching environment – if a computing lab, or computing environment, may not facilitate peer-interactions, or may actively hamper group discussions. Second, student-led interactions with an archive, or other secondary data facility, may not result in usable data (some search terms will not return any data at all). This may be a useful learning experience, indicative of archival search as a difficult undertaking, but it may also lead to disengagement early in the course. As a result, scaffolding browsing activities may be necessary, prior to learners navigating the archive independently.

#### **Additional resources and tools –**

[Teaching how to analyse large volumes of secondary qualitative data](#). NCRM online learning resource.

Lewthwaite, S. & Nind, M. (2019) [A typology for research methods teaching development](#). NCRM Online Resource.

Lewthwaite, S., Weller, S., Jamieson, L., Edwards, R. & Nind, M. (2019) [Developing pedagogy for 'Big Qual' methods: teaching how to analyse large volumes of secondary qualitative data](#). NCRM Working Paper.

## References -

Kilburn, D., Nind, M. & Wiles, R. (2014) [Short courses in advanced research methods: Challenges and opportunities for teaching and learning](#). NCRM Report.

Nind, M. and Lewthwaite, S. (2018) Hard to Teach: Inclusive pedagogy in social science research methods education. *Journal of Inclusive Education*, 22 (1), 74-88. ([doi:10.1080/13603116.2017.1355413](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2017.1355413)).