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Embedding methods within topics for a distance learning programme – BSc (Hons.) Psychology, BSc (Hons.) Forensic Psychology, BSc (Hons.) Psychology with Counselling, BSc (Hons.) Social Psychology, Open University

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The undergraduate degrees in the Open University BPS accredited programme teach methods by embedding them within 60 credit core curriculum modules at Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3, culminating with an independent project at Level 3. There are no methods-specific modules in this distance learning programme. Rather, methods teaching is integrated throughout with topics from core areas of psychology. This means methods are always discussed within the context of concrete examples taken from the topic areas being studied at that point in the module. Optional modules (for example, applied, social, forensic and counselling psychology) contribute to the consolidation of methods teaching but are not the primary site. Teaching is delivered via a distance learning mix of print, audio-visual and interactive online materials, with extensive support from tutors and online forums.

This embedded approach is heavily influenced by the Open University's open entry policy. Open entry means that students come to us with mixed experiences of study, vastly different levels of readiness for university study, and often limited knowledge of psychology. Few are expecting the strong focus on research methods training, and many students lack confidence in anything they may associate with maths skills. This has shaped our approach to embedding research methods within the intriguing and sometimes startling stories from psychology which capture students' attention so well. Inherent interest in the different topics helps take the sting out of research methods and statistics. More importantly, methods are always discussed within the context of the different kinds of topics psychology addresses, the different kinds of questions it asks, and the different kinds of answers that may be derived. Using these examples to teach methods also serves to reinforce students' learning of the topics at hand. This integrative principle runs throughout the curriculum.

At Level 1 classic psychological studies are used to introduce sub-disciplines, key concepts and key principles of research design, data and analysis. Developments since the classic study are explored, often accompanied by examples of studies which have adopted alternative methods of addressing the same topic. Distinctions between quantitative and qualitative research designs are grounded in what kinds of questions researchers are asking. Qualitative analyses, and descriptive and inferential statistics are introduced in terms of what kinds of information they provide and what claims they can support. At each stage elements of research methods and report writing are explained and illustrated by reference to actual studies, often with extracts from primary sources for the current topics being studied, and supported by audio-visual resources demonstrating and discussing design decisions and practical implementation.

Level 2 picks up directly from Level 1, reminding students of the concepts already studied to establish the foundations for more advanced design and analysis. Again, topics from the core areas of biological, cognitive, developmental and social psychology drive the focus. Topics are explored from different perspectives, and perspectives explored for how they influence the research questions that may be asked. Particular attention is paid to disturbing the conventional boundaries between these areas, hence the core theme of the module – crossing boundaries. Similarly, the common quantitative-qualitative divide is replaced with a focus on research questions and methods of best fit. Topics and methods are interwoven in each week of the module, with methods teaching supported by comprehensive interactive online tutorials, including extensive interactive SPSS tutorials, online discussion forums, and extensive audio-visual resources such as interviews with

researchers discussing the methods they have employed in their own studies. By the end of this core 60 credit module students will have studied design for experiments, correlational studies, observational studies, questionnaires and surveys; used SPSS for univariate and multivariate statistics, and conducted thematic and narrative analyses.

For the Level 3 core module the overarching principle is again the integration of methods teaching with topics from core areas of psychology. In this capstone module the focus is on preparing students for completing an independent empirical project. In the first half of the module this is combined with the teaching of core domains from within a framework of critical engagement with methodological issues. Students complete the project in the second half of the module. Research method options include experiments, questionnaires, and language-based qualitative methods such as discourse or phenomenological analyses. Topic choices are constrained to ensure supervisory expertise. Again, extensive print, audio-visual and interactive online materials demonstrate the research process, drawing on interviews with practitioners and encouraging critical engagement with the research process. Extensive ethics teaching supports design development and submission of an ethics form with the research proposal. Each week of the module includes multiple threads for students to engage with according to their chosen research method. Workshops provide further specialist support on developing appropriate design and analytic techniques, such as preparing students for working with online software tools (e.g. OpenSesame, Qualtrics) or techniques for distinct qualitative analyses. A customised interactive timeline visible to supervisors is provided for students to plan their activity.

Practicals and Assessment

At each Level students engage in practical work through numerous online and paper based activities allowing them to test out and develop their understanding of concepts and practices. Assessment of methods at Level 1 includes a combination of short answer questions, online multiple choice questions and a research report of a simple study testing for differences. At Level 2, again in addition to extensive online formative and summative activities, students conduct and write up two summative mini-projects – an experiment and a thematic analysis. The core Level 3 module sees extensive formative and summative assessment of methods learning, followed by an extended independent project supervised by specialist methods tutors. Assessment of the project consists of the project report and a poster presentation. A major requirement for the programme lies in ensuring appropriate supervisory expertise to accommodate the range of methods and topic specialisms available to students on what are unusually high population modules. The network of associate lecturer staff is an essential requirement for achieving this.

Reflections

One of the overarching aims for the accredited qualifications in the programme was to encourage in students a thoughtful and critical engagement with the inextricable relationship between the kinds of questions psychology asks, the assumptions on which they are based, and the non-neutral methods of knowledge production. At the same time, students are exposed to comprehensive teaching about methodology, design and statistical and other analytic tools. This must all be made accessible for students who may have no prior knowledge of psychology, scientific study, or statistics, and must be properly prepared for conducting their own independent empirical project.

Disturbing the conventional boundaries between core domains, and quantitative-qualitative methods has been mostly successful; but ultimately students are still required to elect for one or the other for the independent project. This will be an area for us to explore further.

The integrative framework makes systematic and extensive methods teaching accessible and directly relevant to other core topics under study. But, this approach puts considerable pressure on the core modules, particularly at Level 2 and Level 3 where the methods teaching is extensive and requires considerable skill amongst the module team and the wider tutor team to pace and support students through this ambitious integrated framework. We are now exploring the development of enhanced revision and consolidation materials for independent study.