Teaching Research to Media Students: A Pedagogical Framework

Anubhav Mathur
Assistant Professor
Indian Institute of Mass Communication

Abstract

Learning social science research methods is a difficult task to accomplish for many students in their undergraduate or post graduate course. They often try their best to get a grip of it and in the process many students give up the idea of learning research as a subject. On the hand teachers also face quite a few constraints in teaching research methodology. The constraints are basically due to the very nature of the subject being taught and also because a large body of teaching community is itself not clear about the key concepts in research like paradigms, research approaches and its teaching pedagogy. This paper examines the difficulties and dilemmas teachers face in teaching social science research and also looks at the reasons because of which it fails to become a popular course among college students. To get a better understanding of the problems faced by students in learning research as a subject, interview method was used to collect data in this exploratory study. 55 students from three different colleges with research as a major paper were chosen using purposive sampling with maximum variation for the purpose of the study. They were asked questions pertaining to their experiences while studying research methods and their views on the pedagogy adopted by teachers during social science research classes.

This paper argues that learning problems can be solved by adapting to new teaching methods based on the multiple intelligence demonstrated by students. Further Bandura's Social learning theory and Vygotsky’s theory are instrumental in shaping teaching and learning at cognitive level. Findings indicated that there are issues like inadequate academic resources, lack of qualified teachers and effective use of pedagogy while teaching. The teachers should adopt different pedagogies in classroom and consider teaching mixed method approach by focusing more on each student.
Keywords: Research methods, Teaching pedagogy, Mixed method Approach, Constructivism, Social learning theory, Multiple intelligence

Social Science Research: An Introduction

Merriam Weber dictionary defines social science as “a branch of science that deals with the Institutions and functions of human society and with the interpersonal relationships of individuals as members of society “. Different discipline psychology, geography, sociology, history, communication etc. come under the broad umbrella of social science. All these disciplines grow and add new dimensions with the help of research only. Exploratory work is needed to explore new areas of study which are emerging as society and its members keep evolving and the whole dynamics keeps changing in a fragmented manner. Kilburn et, al (2014) argue that a person should have theoretical understanding of a subject, prior knowledge and knowledge of statistics to undertake research projects. These skills are not easily acquired, it’s a challenge to learn these skills and a bigger challenge to teach these skills to students who may not have any idea about research and its techniques.

Research also assumes certain philosophical assumptions such as Ontology and Epistemology. Ontology looks at what is actually out there in the world about which humans can acquire knowledge. In other words humans have to be certain about the existence of objects about which they wish to acquire knowledge. Ontology answers “What constitutes reality and how can it be understood”.

Epistemology looks at the study of knowledge and how it can be acquired. Epistemology answers three things.

a) What is considered as knowledge?

b) How can it be acquired?

c) How can knowledge be transferred.

Research as a subject has been divided onto two broad dimensions from the early years. There were two approaches to conduct research; Qualitative or Quantitative. This division is evident in
the research papers, books, curriculum and even in the pedagogy of teaching research. As the name suggests quantitative research deals with numbers and involves running certain statistical tests on the primary data acquired by the researcher. The idea is to prove or verify certain hypotheses which the researcher has proposed based on previous work. On the other hand qualitative research deals with experiences, opinions and answers which are in textual or in some literary form and not in numbers. Researchers argue that qualitative research gets more close to human beings and the results are more realist and of higher significance.

Research can also be seen as theoretical and empirical. Theoretical research deals with abstract concepts, the relationships between them and the phenomenon which emerges out of this relationship. Empirical research deals with testing these theoretical concepts and their relationships to see how they fit real world observations. In Inductive research theories and patterns emerge from observed data. In the other method theories and patterns are tested with real world data in order to verify the theory, this is deductive approach.

Social science research can be classified broadly as Explanatory and Exploratory depending on its purpose and application. Exploratory research explores new areas of research within the discipline. It looks at answering “What” and “How” questions. Exploratory research is done to find the extent of a problem or the frequency of a certain phenomenon occurring. Explanatory research answers “Why” questions and looks at identifying the reasons of a particular phenomenon. Most of the academic research in communication is explanatory.

**Need for a Right Pedagogy and Research Approach**

Research based teaching pedagogy, cognitive theories and keen participation by students plays an important role in improving the methodological practice of teaching research. Teaching in a formal setting is called Pedagogy. The teacher imparts same knowledge to his students at the same time where the locations of the students might be different. Research has shown that there is a lack of guidance given to teachers. Teachers’ are not aware of the recent developments happening in pedagogy which impacts their teaching in a big way. Wagner et al., (2011) argues
that academic institutions and bodies lack a culture of research which eventually effects the teaching pedagogy used in classrooms. This happens because the institutions often do not invest enough resources in training their faculty, buying good books and reputed journals and think that faculty members should be involved in non-research based teaching and other administrative affairs. There is a lack of debate and disagreement on these issues among the members of teaching fraternity. Teachers also question the credentials of their faculty members and are not willing to improve their skill sets. Sharma (1992) argues that problems such as lesser number of faculty members in social science departments and the preference to teach research in their own regional language without the use of technology severely affects the teaching and learning of research in the country.

Earley (2014) argues that this lack in pedagogic culture forces teachers to go for trial and error methods for teaching, dependence on peers, use of unsystematic teaching methods rather than using research based pedagogic knowledge. This indicates that the academic background and caliber of the students is not taken into account and research methodology is taught like any other subject. Although the University Grants Commission (UGC) gives grant for research methodology workshops, these workshops don’t focus on teaching pedagogy but rather on statistics and research. Thorat & Verma (2017) have also argued on the same lines and have talked about the various initiatives taken by the government to promote the culture of research in India. They further talk about the publication of the Kothari report which seeks to emphasize on the national frameworks and policies to support research at institutional level.

The pedagogy to be adopted also varies with the level of understanding of the students. Teaching method also depends on the subject and course being taught. Research is taught in graduate, post graduate and doctoral programs where the difficulty level of the subject varies and consequently the rigor increases. Keeping this mind the pedagogy has to be designed and modified if need be. With the advent of Information Communication technology students are virtually connected with teachers. They have access to massive amount of databases and literature. Data for research is available on government and private websites. Internet offers better and faster ways of gathering data and conducting research.
Teaching by using the right method not only makes the student intellectually sound but also helps him in his growth (Cuenca, 2010). The intent of the pedagoge is also a key factor in unifying right pedagogy with knowledge and skillset. The teacher should have right knowledge about teaching and should also be keen learner (Loughran et al, 2008). The responsibility of a teacher is to build right environment and its settings in which students can reason, argue, discuss, learn and confirm what they have imbibed. Teaching pedagogy can be implemented either in a planned or in an unplanned way. Pedagogy can be seen as a dynamic construct which needs to be improvised in real time and is dependent on the way students reciprocate during the learning process. Pedagogy demands intuition, reasoning, anticipation and techniques of assimilation to put all these information into meaningful expression using Interpersonal communication (Guba and Lincoln, 2005).

Much research has gone into finding out what works in teaching social science. There are debates on the lack of relation between teaching theory and conducting research. Theoretical underpinning behind quantitative research and verifying it with statistical results has also been in question. This takes us to the need of devising a model of self-enquiry to identify the working mechanism clearly;

The model where teachers enquire into has three steps;

1. The important outcomes based on the teaching, i.e. the part where the teacher has to focus.
2. The actions, methods, tools, aids which will most likely improve the performance of the students.
3. The end result or the actual impact of using these methods on the learning of the students for time to come.

The focusing enquiry looks at the learning outcomes and what might be useful for students learning advanced concepts. Priorities are set by referring to documents like curriculum, teacher
interests, the goals of students and finally the learning needs, strengths and motivation of the
students. Research has shown learning results from gathering information, collaborating to make
knowledge, and applying this acquired knowledge. This acquired knowledge is shared between
the learners to achieve common goals in allied areas. Teaching by forming groups and giving
group assignments also help students to work as team and in the process they do brainstorming
and apply their minds on a particular problem in a collective manner. Some of the questions
which teachers should consider while preparing for their classes:

a) What key concepts should students know and in what order?

b) Which teaching method will suit them?

c) What teaching aids could be used for this group; exercises, discussions, short questions?

d) Will they learn the subject through these tools and how long will they remember it?

Theoretical Framework

One way to understand the pedagogy of teaching research as a subject is by re-examining
constructivism and collaboration. Constructivism advocates the idea of constructing knowledge
by being an active learner. It promotes the idea of integrating past knowledge and experiences
with the newly constructed information. Constructivism on an individual level is followed by
collaborative work which offers greater opportunities to understand each other’s work. This
gives a better understanding of each member’s contribution, their perspective on the subject and
their decisions which come after analysis and synthesis (Davis, 2009). This leads to an
improvement in the cognition and meta-cognition skills of the learner.

The idea of social learning is associated with collaborative learning. Bandura’s Social learning
Theory (Bandura, 1977) talks about modelling behavior and learning through imitation. In
collaborative environment students imitate the behavior of their peers and learn the methods and
techniques used by other students (Bandura and Walters, 1963). A right level of cognition of the
individual will help him to become active learner. Vygotsky’s theory (1978) advocates that
social interaction plays a key role in the cognitive development of an individual. He believed that
the social interactions of a child in his community help in construction of his thinking processes, thus helping him to make “meanings of things”. The role of culture is an important element in Vygotsky’s theory. It could be argued that better social interaction leads to faster cognitive development which can help in the process of active learning through constructivism. Further it can be argued that this cognitive development explains how individuals use their intelligence to solve day-day problems and make their life smooth and trouble free (Gardner, 2006). Social learning and constructivism develops multiple abilities in individuals to perform varied tasks where they might use linguistic, spatial, mathematical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, Kinesthetic and musical skills to accomplish tasks. Gardner (1983) in his theory of multiple intelligence argued that these abilities are present in every individual but are developed in varying proportions. The difference in development of these abilities is dependent on the way they are put to use in different socio cultural factors.

**Challenges Media Educators’ Face**

The development of teaching methods for communication research is still in its nascent stage in India. Attitude about research as a subject are found by views and personal experiences of students who are not able to understand the subject or could not perform well in the examinations(Gelman and Loken , 2014). These attitudes are not based on any systematic research work or scientific study. Scholars have observed that quantitative methods are not discussed at length and are often given least importance(MacInnes,2012; Jones and Goldring,2015). There is a need to adopt mixed methods approach in teaching research both in classrooms and in fieldwork. Mixed Method approach is being advocated in curriculum to help the students to do more realist research with tangible outcomes(Creswell et al,2003; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2010). The debate, discussion and published work on teaching pedagogy for research is quite less as compared to literature on research methods used in social science. It has been seen that people who develop teaching methods have minimum idea about its pedagogy and its philosophy. These people may have high subject knowledge but they lack correct knowledge about pedagogy for teaching research especially at entry level programs. It has been found that teachers who have just joined the profession find it difficult to teach research . They teach themselves first before imparting the knowledge to their students(Creswell et al, 2003).
Methodology

Open ended questions were given to 55 college students in advance. These students were selected in a purposive manner from 3 colleges. Students were asked to pen down their experiences of learning research as their subject which included the difficulties they faced in the pedagogy used. They were given about 60 minutes to write the responses. Every student had taken research as a paper in their previous courses. Phenomenological approach is best suited for this study. Quite a few students studied research for a period of six months and others had it for one full year.

Questions were based on the pedagogy used in classrooms, the use of books and assessment techniques and their overall experience while studying and doing research. Students were also asked questions on problems they face in understanding mathematical concepts and analysis. 23 girls and 32 boys agreed to be a part of the study.

Findings

Students should be taught the reasons behind the occurrence of a phenomenon in society. The focus should be more on answering “Why” questions as compared to “How” questions. (Rein and White, 1981) Media educators often discover the events in an exploratory manner and often try to understand with behaviors of individuals rather than logically trying to interpret the meaning behind the phenomenon. The way educators analyze the occurrence of a social event should be logical and should generate interest in the minds of students. Very often they approach towards research is not discussed as a result the whole research process is perceived by students as illogical and uninteresting.

Data analysis showed that 58% of the students liked research as a paper in their programme. 67% of the students agreed that research should be taught in media courses and is an important and useful subject.
21% of the students agreed that learning material should be given to facilitate proper learning. 11% of students also said that visual tools should be used more often keeping in view their learning styles. 32% of the students said that there should be more practical exercises and writing exercises. 8% of the students suggested that research should be taught with the help of experiments and case studies.

On the question of teaching method and its appropriateness 11% of the students said they are not told about the use of secondary research and its uses. 10% of the students said that teachers focus on the theoretical concepts from the book and do not give emphasis on tasks and projects. 61% of the students said teaching methods are not effective as no stress is given on innovative methods and critical thinking. 72% of the students agreed that the use of online tools would be of great help to them.

On the question of the steps to be taken at institutional level. 42% felt that universities and colleges should ensure that research curriculum has credits for assignments. 21% students said that students should be encouraged to publish papers either individually or in collaboration with the faculty members. 17% said teachers should be approachable and should attend to student problems individually if need arises. 62% students said that the learning resources like books, access to journals & databases and online access to library is inadequate. Almost 23% felt that institutions should organize workshops, seminars and special lectures on a regular basis. 32% of the students told that different teachers had taught them research during their program. Every teacher had their own style of teaching and assessing the students. Students faced difficulty in following their instructions which were rather contradictory at times.

When asked about their level of comfort with mathematics almost 70% of the students they are afraid of mathematics and would prefer doing a qualitative study.
Some of the responses given by the students are stated below:

- I don’t see the need for research in mass communication.
- I feel that the subject matter is very dry and tough.
- I think this paper is time consuming and of no use.
- I would benefit by studying other subjects to improve my job prospects. I don’t understand the need of this research paper in media studies.
- My interest is in helping people by writing good news stories and exposing the truth.
- What will I get after studying research?
- The teaching method is not student friendly, the teachers assumes that students already have a good idea of the subject.
- Why should we study statistics, why can't we just speak to people and do research.

**Discussion and Suggestions**

An effective teaching and learning method takes time to develop. It is a process where the teacher has to constantly strive to make it better. The pedagogy has to be interactive with a friendly approach but at the same time has to be rigorous and result oriented. The teacher has to ensure that the learning process is open with no apprehensions and fear. (Onwuegbuzie, 1997).

Having prior knowledge about each student’s strength, subject reference, perception, attitudes and beliefs will help in making the pedagogy better. The pedagogy will be successful if the knowledge acquired is put to some use in day to day life. Recently with the coming of online tools designed to calculate sample size, identify and run statistical procedures the pedagogy has reached on a new level.

The teacher should also highlight the importance of research in their daily lives and how research can help them to live life in an intelligent way. Good teachers implement research findings and recognize that what works with one group of students may not work with different group of students. Perseverance and patience will go a long way in finding what method suits the student’s best and encouraging enquiry among students can lead to solutions and further clarifications. Research as a course should be introduced in the initial years of the course. One paper each year on research methodology can actually help students to learn it better and develop
a positive attitude towards research and its applications. There is also a dearth of good books and students find it difficult to comprehend the language and style of foreign authors. The teachers recommend books which they had studied and these are often not the best books on that subject. Quite a few teachers and instructors give least emphasis to research papers and often ask students to skip it as they themselves are not confident in that subject. This attitude also effects the perception of the students towards research in a big way. Hesse-Biber (2015) agrees with Creswell(2003) and suggests that teachers are generally self-taught and often lack a knowledge of pedagogy.

Different Universities and Institutes have their own curricula which are generally applied in the context of the programme being offered. Moreover the topics in the curricula are often different and are given minimum credit. Because of this teachers also take less interest in teaching research and also tell students to take research modules lightly. As per Stacey (2012) it is up to us to devise a study to widen the conversation and to find solutions or to close it. To make the pedagogy easier, the educator has to elaborate the topic of research and also has to make the research design more lucid for the students.

The instructor will benefit by putting to practice these points not in this order but considering them as the case may be:

a) Checking Prior Knowledge:

In order to come up to the expectations of their students ,teachers should get a better understanding of their students. The commonly used methods of knowing about their knowledge of a subject are conversations, pre-tests, questionnaires, class room discussions and multiple choice questions. The teacher will also get an idea of the pedagogy to be adopted for successful teaching. Concepts like research design, sampling and statistical tests should be revised at initial stages.
b) Learning from Previous Research

Students understand new concepts by relating it to the previous knowledge they had acquired. This synthesis of new and old information to generate new knowledge goes through a process of selection, sorting and reintegration. To support this process, teachers need to revise the concepts and put them in different perspectives so that students can get a clear understanding.

Previous literature published in books, journal articles, websites, etc., will help students do a good job in their research assignments and projects. Thorough literature review can help them understand the strategies that other students have used to find out about a topic for similar studies. It can be an interview technique or a questionnaire with closed questions only. Howard and Brady (2015) argue that students find research papers most demanding and difficult (Earley, 2014; Wagner et al., 2011).

c) Align Classroom Work with Research Topic

Aligning teaching activities with the research topic often helps students in achieving their research goals. If the objective is to make students more skillful at identifying research design for a study, then effective teachers carefully and deliberately align lectures, examples, and queries to help students in learning research designs and their types.

A study to understand the behavior of teenage girls on social networking sites can be done using observation and interview. The application of data collection methods will help in grasping the concept in a better way and will also clarify their doubts. Such applications will not only increase their interest but will also change their perception of communication research as a dull and boring subject.

d) Revisit, Analyze and Connect

To ensure that students have learnt the concept correctly, teachers should do exercises and assignments where these concepts are put to use. Analysis of right approach for a sturdy, decisions regarding sample size and techniques are crucial for any research study. Research question should be written in a manner which makes the design and statistical tools easy to identify. Pedagogy becomes effective when students analyze the research work done by their
peers and discuss the gaps in the work. One popular approach is to analyze the similarities and differences in class work. This encourages the weaker students to make their research work robust by adopting to a new design.

**Conclusion**

Learning research methods in general is a continuous, everyday process that not only clarifies concepts but also builds perseverance among students. Social science research is a different subject which is feared by many and comes only but putting it to use. Short assignments, projects and even data driven stories can help learning the fundamentals. Research as a subject is also undergoing through many changes especially with the increasing acceptance of mixed methods research. Teacher would do good by including both qualitative and quantitative approaches in the curriculum and also be giving equal weightage to these topics in classroom teaching and online teaching. Students have different level of competencies in logic, language, oral, written and mathematical skills which can be improved further. Researchers and teachers should identify these skills and encourage them to perform better and implement the learnt research techniques on a day-day basis. Therefore, people need each other to help bring to the surface what they already know and then to broaden and refine those ideas and concepts to become significant individuals who can offer special attributes that positively influence our daily lives as well as society.

**References**


Earley, M. (2014) A synthesis of the literature on research methods education, Teaching in Higher Education,


