

TEACHING SOCIOLOGY AT ESSEX WITH ARCHIVED DATA

Summary report

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Scope

This is a summary report of the 'Using data in sociology teaching' project, funded through the University of Essex's internal Teaching and Learning Innovation Fund (TALIF). The project was jointly led by the UK Data Archive and the Department of Sociology at the University of Essex.

1. Background to the project

In October 2010, the Department of Sociology at the University of Essex and the UK Data Archive's ESDS Qualidata developed an assignment for the module Crime and Social Control which incorporated the use of research methods with the practice of accessing and analysing archived qualitative research data.

The initial step of the pilot project involved the mass registration of sixty students with the Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS). The assignment involved exploring the service's qualitative collections relating specifically to issues of crime and social control. The students were required to examine the research methods used in the collections and to consider alternative methods and research questions. Finally they were asked to formulate a research question for their own third-year project. Students were encouraged to use ESDS teaching packs and thematic guides as additional resources throughout the assignment.

This TALIF-funded project took place in three stages, starting with a full evaluation of the pilot project. The second stage extended the pilot by developing online assignments for other sociology modules. The final stage developed an online template for additional assignments in new subject areas that can be adapted and used in other sociology courses and across departments.

2. Phase one

2.1. Evaluation of the pilot assignment

The initial stage of the project was to evaluate the pilot assignment, to assess how effective it was and to assess where it could be strengthened and improved.

Jackie Turton, of the University of Essex, formally marked the assignments for her students and moderated a sample of the assignments marked by other tutors on the course. Bethany Morgan Brett, of the UK Data Archive, read through the assignments in order to identify areas for improvement and carried out a survey of student opinion about the assignment. This was then followed up with an interview with one student 'Anna'.

The pilot assignment was divided into eight small sections or sequential steps which the students should complete. Each section set out a specific aim and offered a suggested word count in brackets as a guide.

The overall aims of the assignment were for the students to familiarise themselves with the ESDS's collections, learn about secondary analysis as a methodological strategy, and to learn about the topic of crime and control from exploring archived qualitative research collections which have explored the same issues.

2.2. The feedback

One of the most positive aspects of the pilot assignment was that students were extremely enthusiastic about the Archive and learning about the resources available to them.

The survey response showed 78 per cent of the respondents had never heard of the UK Data Archive before completing this assignment, 22 per cent had, 91 per cent had not heard of ESDS. However, exploring the data from the UK Data Archive and learning about the reuse of archived data were the things that students

commented on most and said that they enjoyed most about the assignment.

Overall the assignments were done fairly well, but we identified ways in which the assignment could benefit from small improvements to encourage a greater degree of creativity and engagement with the topic.

On a general level many of the assignments could have been strengthened through a more critical engagement with the chosen study and through an exploration of alternative studies chosen from the data catalogue.

Students needed to interrogate the data more and ensure that any ensuing discussion demonstrated applied knowledge. There needed to be more evidence that students had explored the catalogue, the chosen collections and accompanying documentation and publications.

Students found the thematic guide useful but there were a few hitches as some collections could not be accessed. We have since updated and modified six thematic guides so that they only list fully accessible and easily downloadable collections. In discussions with ESDS Qualidata, it has been decided that there should be two thematic guides for this topic; one for teaching which only includes downloadable collections which do not have any restrictions on them, and another which includes more classic collections, some of which may be paper-based.

One of the biggest issues with the assignments was that they were often under-researched and under-referenced. Although this is a common problem across courses, it was a particular issue in this assignment.

Students, particularly in section three, often relied too heavily on A-level methods knowledge. Many assignments required a more robust connection with the criminological and research literature. Students could have made more connection to the study rather than to a general account of the advantages and disadvantages of methods. Through more careful wording in the instruction they could be encouraged to develop an evidence-based rationale for their alternative choice of methodology, illustrating their argument with quotations from the data collection.

Similarly section four lacked discussions about the intricacies of the arguments for and against secondary analysis. We suggested that this could be rectified by giving students a reading list of resources to look at for information on secondary analysis and encouraging them to look at the publications arising from the original research. A reading list was compiled in order to encourage wider reading and improve this section.

Opinion was mixed about the formatting of the report. When asked to rank the assignment structures in the survey, the report style seemed to be the preferred format. The question style where students would answer a series of smaller more focused questions, was also ranked highly. The web form was not preferred and the essay format was the least popular option.

Eight surveyed students commented that the current format of the assignment was what they liked least about it, yet twelve students said that the format of the assignment was what they liked best about it.

Students seemed to like the structure the assignment format gave them, but others did not know how to achieve high grades and demonstrate their knowledge through this structure. In parts of the assignment there was not the opportunity for students to demonstrate or expand upon the research that they had done, in particular section one. This was a source of frustration for the diligent students who wanted to score highly, but could not show the work that had gone into this. Careful wording of particular sections and asking students to demonstrate their knowledge more could have improved this.

We decided to increase the word count from 2,000 to 3,000 words. When asked about the length of the assignment 52 per cent of students thought the length was 'just right', 26 per cent thought it was too short and 22 per cent thought it was too long. There were no responses at the extreme ends of the scale. Four students commented that the short word count was what they disliked most about the whole assignment. There is arguably not enough room to fully consider the chosen study in detail as well as being able to give a detailed account of secondary analysis as a method. As one student said in the survey it was "too short to be

able to construct a reasonable argument”.

Some of our suggestions for additional sections include a section on the ethics of doing secondary analysis and reflections on how useful this method would be for their future research. There also could be a section on personal reflections on the assignment in general i.e. what have they learnt?

Generally the assignments lacked creativity and were monotonous to mark. This could be improved with more connection to the data and offering more examples. We suggest that students could also be more creative in section five and design an interview schedule or series of survey questions which they could use to study the topic. Students could also be encouraged to attach a small appendix of information and data that they have referred to from the chosen data collection.

From a teaching perspective tutors might benefit from more guidance to make the reports easier to mark. We suggest that any contextual information or ‘answers’ could be gathered together and presented in a ‘tutor’s pack’.

3. Phase two

3.1. Exploring courses

We entered phase two in April 2011 and began by exploring the courses that the sociology department were offering for undergraduate study. The empirical modules which we identified as the most suitable for this kind of assignment were:

- SC242-5: Sociology of Crime and Control
- SC224-5: New Media and Contemporary Cultural Change
- SC203-5: Researching Social Life
- SC291-5: Sociology of Sexualities
- SC106-4: Introduction to Media, Culture and Society
- SC310-6: Youth Culture: Crime, Consumption and the City
- SC394-6: The Body and Modern Society
- SC933-7: Globalization, International Migration and Ethnicity

We consulted with the course directors for Youth Culture, Media, Crime, and Sexualities, to assess the interest in and feasibility of this type of assignment in their courses. We also discussed the types of topics/substantive issues which form the key subject matter of their courses and assignments. We discussed the level of research skill expected at various key points for undergraduates and thereby what levels of questions can be incorporated into online assignments.

3.2. Redesigning the assignment

After collating the feedback that we received from the student survey, student interview, consultation with course directors, and through the review of the assignments, we determined which elements of the feedback were feasible to change on the assignment and based on these we began the redesign.

The redesign included a greater element of creativity, which we felt was missing from the pilot assignment. For this we asked student in section nine to design an interview schedule of at least five questions which they could use to investigate their overall research question. We also asked students to reflect, in their conclusion, upon what they had learnt and how the use of archived material can help them with their future research. We wanted the new design to also relate more to the substantive theme so we left section seven open for the tutor to add a question that relates specifically to the course. Another aim was to get students to engage and interrogate the data more, so we gave more explicit instruction to make reference to their

chosen collection.

We strengthened the methodology section by giving students more guidance about what to write in their answer rather than allowing for a basic comparison of methods. We also asked students to locate a case study of how other researchers have used archived resources and we asked them to list the advantages and disadvantages of secondary analysis. The aim was to encourage students to see secondary analysis as a method in its own right and not just considering the methods used by the primary researcher.

Some students in the pilot assignment seemed to have difficulty identifying and locating readings on secondary analysis, so we created a reading list to accompany the assignment. We also asked students to consider looking at the publications which came out of the research.

In terms of the formatting, the report format was a popular choice amongst the students in their feedback. So we kept this design, and now require students to write it as a report rather than having the option to write it as an essay.

We considered different ideas for how the students could write their answers - either as a report that they write and label themselves, as a form that they fill in, or as an online webform. The problem we found with students filling in a pre-designed form was that once it passed through the Turnitin plagiarism system, all the assignments would appear to be plagiarised due to the text of the questions on the form. We made the decision to require students to write their answers as a report with corresponding section headings.

To accompany the assignment we designed a tutor's guide which outlined the aims of the assignment, and the instructions that tutors need to give to their students. It also offered a brief introduction to the UK Data Archive and ESDS, an introduction to reusing archived data and a table of advantages and limitations of reuse.

We also created a marking template which included the questions followed by a box for tutor feedback for each question. We then found that this would be a problematic design, because it would create excess printing for each student. Therefore we changed the design so that the final marking sheet could retain the boxes for each section, but could also fit onto one page to be stapled to the top of the returned assignment.

We simplified the registration and accessing collection steps, with clearly worded instructions and links to the sites which can help them to register. ESDS also wrote a new guide to registration which helped with this process.

3.3. Thematic guides

We also updated and developed a range of thematic guides to accompany the assignment, which would help tailor the resource to a particular sociological theme.

ESDS Qualidata developed a range of thematic guides in 2005, but these have become outdated and not all collections were easily downloadable for teaching purposes. This was a problem identified in our pilot assignment, when we realised that some of the collections required special access permissions from the depositors. Our aim was to update these thematic guides with new collections which were suitable for teaching. The thematic areas were: crime, youth studies, sexualities, gender, media and health.

Each guide highlighted a selection of collections which were most appropriate in that thematic area for teaching purposes. All collections were checked for suitability for teaching, accessibility and relevance.

Each thematic guide showcases a selection of up to eight archived qualitative collections. Each collection is chosen based upon its interesting and relevant content, the ease of accessibility, and its appropriateness for teaching. We downloaded and explored each collection in detail to ascertain its relevance. We drafted a brief

introduction to the theme, updated the template, identified new links to external resources on that method, and then created a grid to summarise the features of the collection. The grid does this by giving brief details about the dates of field work, key words, the sample size and population, the place, the method and the type of data held. We decided to update the thematic guides on crime, gender, youth and health and created completely new guides on sexualities and on media.

4. Phase three

4.1. Developing the resource

In the final phase of this project we worked closely together and with The department of Health and Human Sciences to refine the assignment's design, to develop a final generic template, and create two final assignment designs for two courses: SC242-5-FY-CO: Sociology of Crime and Control (in the sociology department) and HS305-6-AU: Health Policy and Practice: sociological approaches (in the health and human sciences department). We also redesigned the marking template and finalised the thematic guides.

There was considerable discussion about the development of these assignments online, but we decided that at this stage we would consolidate these ideas. We made the decision to implement the assignment in its simplest form with students able to download the assignment instruction sheet from Moodle, then writing it as a report – printing and submitting in the usual way.

In October 2011, Bethany Morgan Brett, led two classes with the two courses SC242 (70 students) and HS305 (6 students) in which she gave an introduction to the UK Data Archive and ESDS, explained the assignment, registered the students and demonstrated the downloading of collections.

In these classes Bethany encouraged the students to use the ESDS guide to registering and downloading. This was to test that the guide will work for future courses without the need for specific classes for this purpose. On the whole most students were able to follow the instructions and we are hopeful that the template will be able to stand alone in future years without the need for contact time from us. ESDS user support should be able to assist with any queries students might have.

The assignment has now been set for these two courses, with the deadline in December 2011.

4.2. Student's evaluation of the final resource

In February 2012 Bethany held a small focus group with students who had completed the health and social care assignment.

None of the students had heard of the UK Data Archive or ESDS before the start of the assignment. They found the registration process straightforward and were confident that had they been asked to register on their own (with guidance from a handout) then they would be able to do this. One student said 'nowadays most people are used to registering for things'. They also felt confident that they knew how to go back, explore and download collections from the ESDS website. They were impressed with the collections that they had explored. One student said that 'looking at the transcripts is quite helpful for setting up your own (project)'. She said 'I quite liked it, because it was kind of structured I suppose. And I found it interesting to go into transcripts. I found that bit quite absorbing. A bit too absorbing perhaps! I had to stop myself and I wanted to go on and read more'.

The opinion was mixed about the style of the assignment. Some students liked the report format as it provided a strong structural base for their assignment but one student commented that 'I think I preferred my normal type of essay purely because I like going off on my own stream of interpretation and analysis, but I didn't not enjoy it'.

The students found it interesting to see the research process in its entirety. One said 'it made it quite interesting that you read the transcripts and then read the report afterwards and saw what they got from it'.

The students hadn't realised prior to the assignment that there were usually multiple outputs from a research project. A student noted 'something I did learn though was, I didn't realise that when a study was done, so this data was created and then they could pull two or three different journal articles out of it'. Another said 'I think because the way we are taught is that you just go out and collect your data for what you want to write...and since then I have read a book which is based on an article that I read, the book and the article were both based on the same data...I did not realise...it was like 'oh this is how the real world works!'

They also found that this was a useful skill applicable to their own projects. One student described how she had to conduct interviews for her third year dissertation. She said 'I don't know how I would have done it if I hadn't had those transcripts to read through, because it gives you an idea of how an interview might go. For that reason I found it really interesting'.

4.3. Future impact of the project

We have had detailed discussions with other course leaders and have had interest from course leaders in comparative-historical modules, visual methods, youth, research methods, sexuality and gender. We think the success of the assignments in crime and social control and in health policy means that we envisage the continued use of this assignment in some of these courses.

We feel that the assignment enables students to develop a number of skills. Students learn important research discovery skills including how to explore and search official websites. They learn about the specific restrictions on certain data, as well as issues of confidentiality and data protection when working with personal data. Through the exploration of data collections they also learn about a wide variety of research methods through the collections, without having to actually do the fieldwork, which is not always feasible for undergraduate research projects

In completing the assignment students learn to engage with a genuine, real-life piece of research. They are asked to complete specific tasks and working within word limits. Students also have to identify aims and objectives in a piece of research, summarise and evaluate research outcomes, as well as develop their own research questions. Furthermore students are able to follow a piece of academic research right through the data lifecycle, from conception to publication. Students are able to explore the whole process, from the proposal, research methods chosen and the pilots that are carried out, the questions that are asked, how interpretations are made and how this results in an academic publication.

These skills have particular applicability for students' future employability, particularly if they enter into an academic career. Future research funding (especially from the ESRC) may mandate an exploration of archived data to demonstrate that similar research does not already exist before embarking on primary data collection.

Furthermore future research funding (especially from the ESRC) may require researchers to deposit their data with an archive so therefore this assignment highlights the work the archive does, how data can be reused and the value of reuse. The assignment also raises awareness of the vast number of collections that the archive holds, so therefore provides a useful resource for future careers (i.e. policing, social work, teaching, lecturing, government, support work etc), so that if they need to find out information about a particular topic they can refer to studies that are held there.