Partnering Students in Practical Research

ABSTRACT

While G08 universities are marketed as research intensive, there has been little opportunity for Bachelor of Social Science students enrolled at the University of Adelaide to receive dedicated research training. Social Research Advanced (SRA) was designed for students to experience and practice the various stages in the research process from design, literature review, ethics, field work, and finally, the writing of the research report. Student response to driving their own research was that it provided a more dynamic, practical and 'hands on' approach to understanding and 'doing' social research. This "learning by exuberance" (Nygaard, Højl & Hermansen, 2008) finding resonates with other academics from different disciplinary backgrounds who have included student research projects in their teaching (Frishman, 2001; Hequet, 2010; Bernard, 2011).

This paper has three aims. Firstly, to offer background on how the course was conceived as both important training for postgraduate study as well as job-ready skills for graduate employment. Secondly, the paper aims to provide the rationale for and design of SRA, particularly with regard to pedagogical considerations in terms of moving students through an initial state of anxiety to a position where they took ownership of their research. The third aim is to review student responses to the course, which show that while overall student feedback was positive, changes are also required to reduce anxiety and give students more in-class opportunities to practice skills in advance of doing assignments.

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Introduction

While G08 universities are marketed as research intensive, there has been little opportunity for Bachelor of Social Science (BSocSci) students enrolled at the University of Adelaide to acquire and demonstrate their knowledge of social research. Yet such training would develop their employability skills beyond generic graduate attributes (Baker & Henson, 2010; Manathunga & Wissler, 2003) and provide a sound base for internships and postgraduate studies.

A recent major restructure of the BSocSci provided the opportunity to redress this situation and the degree program, which prepares students to investigate, analyse and interpret social justice challenges, now includes a preparatory course in social research methods – Social Research (SR). The intention with SR was to familiarise students with key concepts and methods as a starting point; this background knowledge would then inform an advanced level course – Social Research Advanced (SRA) – during which students would conduct an independent, semester long research project.

SRA was designed for students to experience and practice the various stages in the research process from design, literature review, ethics, field work, and finally, the writing of the research report. The course emphasises partnering with students as they progress through the stages of research rather than an academic imparting a particular body of knowledge. For pedagogical reasons of wanting to avoid students becoming overwhelmed, confused and unfocused by throwing wide open the research topic and question, we provided an 'umbrella question' (Loertscher, 2009) to structure the project: 'what do students say about their experience at university?' Students were then required to narrow the focus of this question by pursuing a particular angle of inquiry related to student experience. Example questions were: How well do orientation programs prepare international students from English speaking countries? How well do students balance paid work and university commitments? How engaged with on campus social activities are 21st century university students?

In this paper we review the teaching of the inaugural SRA course in 2012. We begin by exploring the reasons why SRA was implemented as the culmination of the restructured BSocSci degree progam. That is, SRA was intended as a course within which students are able to call on skills and knowledge acquired throughout the program, and during which they could demonstrate their mastery of "the "what," "why," and "how" of the cultural tools that [social] scientists employ"(Tabak & Baumgartner, 2004, p. 393). This is followed by a review of the rationale for and overview of the design of SRA. Finally, we explore particular pedagogical challenges in the opening stages of the course as well as provide evidence of student response. The latter indicated that students driving their own research provided a more dynamic, practical and 'hands on' approach to learning, a "learning by exuberance" (Nygaard, Højl, & Hermansen, 2008) which resonates widely and across a variety of fields in which students have conducted independent research projects (Frishman, 2001; Hequet, 2010; Bernard, 2011).

BACKGROUND: RESTRUCTURING THE BACHELOR OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

The 2008-2009 restructuring of the BSocSci was undertaken around the core ideas of 'partnership' and 'employability.' The definition of partnership we use here is one of cooperation, ie, a loose arrangement which benefits those involved (Shinners, 2006) and we had in mind students as well as prospective employers. With the trend toward vocational education in the university sector in Australia as well as overseas, and a desire for students to be employable in satisfying work, we actively sought to engage with employers about what knowledge and skill set they required from emerging graduates (Foskett, 2007; Fairweather, 1989; Baker & Henson, 2010). Through interviews with public, private, and non-government organisations, it became increasingly clear that employers wanted

graduates who understood and were able to apply social justice principles as a result of their study, skills which could be translated into work place practice. As well, and in addition to generic proficiencies of critical thinking, problem solving, communication and interpersonal relationships (Badcock, Pattison, & Harris, 2010), employers wanted students to graduate with particular skill sets. The ability to conduct, interpret and critique social research; to analyse and grapple with policy issues; and to be able to translate social theory into practical outcomes were specific requirements.

These employer specifications for the BSocSc therefore led to restructuring the program within distinct parameters. That is, the degree program was re-designed to offer a practical, sequential, progression based curriculum which took a scaffolding approach to knowledge and skill development applicable in both the class room and workplace. An overview of issues within the BSocSc first introduces students to the field and the notion of critical thinking. Students then progress through the degree with knowledge acquirement becoming increasingly more complex, and their expertise and mastery of theory and practice commensurately increasing and becoming more multifaceted (De León, 2012). Demonstration of their knowledge then culminates in SRA. To illustrate: Social Research (SR) develops students' knowledge and understanding of research - how and why it is done - and exposes students to different theoretical perspectives and methodologies employed by researchers. For SRA, students then use skills developed in SR - formulating a research question, interpreting information, designing, and conducting a survey and interviews. Social Theory in Action (STIA) has already prepared students for the various ways in which social scientists explain or theorise the social world, and SRA builds on this knowledge to explore and explain student experience in higher education. Social Policy and Citizenship (SPC) focuses on the historical and contemporary constructions of Australian citizenship. This prepares students well to engage with higher education policy and theories of citizenship in their SRA project.

In addition to a partnership with employers, we extend the concept of partnership to graduate students. We do this in three ways: first, by positioning SRA so that students wanting to apply for an Arts Internship through the University are well prepared to work with an external organisation. Second, by exposing prospective postgraduate students to the complete research process so they have an understanding of what to expect during the next level of their studies. Finally, the University's Career Service staff have become an important partner for both the degree program, teaching staff and, of course, students. For example, embedded into the core research courses is material designed to increase student awareness of how particular skills enhances their employability in a range of sectors, as shown in Figure 1.
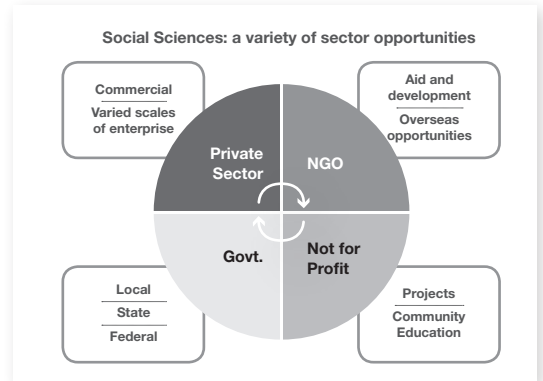

Figure 1 Employment opportunities for Bachelor of Social Science graduates have been identified as possible across all employment sectors – Private, Public, Non-Government and Not-For-Profit. Source: Career Services, University of Adelaide.

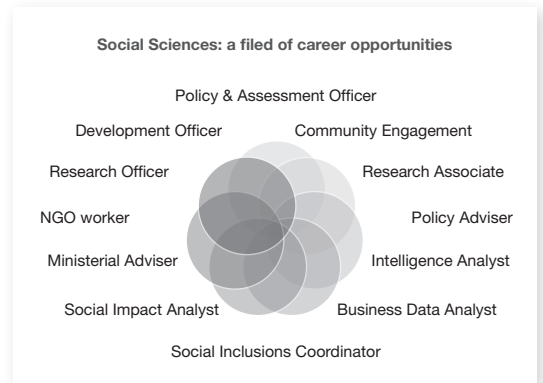There is also an impact on jobs, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Within each of the employment sectors there are also a variety of possible positions for which Bachelor of Social Sciences graduates may be engaged, including research, analysis and advisory positions. Source: Career Services, University of Adelaide

Other important considerations regarding the restructure of the BSocSci was that we wanted to embed a facilitative and mentoring approach in our teaching. By facilitative we mean striving for that "balance between bringing out the knowledge of people while going beyond the people's knowledge" (Peters & Armstrong, 1998, p. 75). Our concept of mentoring contains an ethic of equality between student and academic, while cognisant of power differentials within the hierarchal structure of the university. It also recognises the co-construction of knowledge. We were passing on knowledge about the research process, but in turn we learned from students, for example, about how to improve our practice (Hargreaves, 2010). In other words, we wanted to create an alliance or partnership with students (Billson & Tiberius, 1991).

Designing Social Research Advanced

There were three aims of SRA. First, and as described above, we wanted students to apply their knowledge of social theory, social policy, and social research by designing and undertaking an independent research project. The latter required students to proceed systematically through all stages of the research process, i.e., to formulate a research question, conduct a literature review, seek ethics approval for the project, employ two methods (quantitative and qualitative) to generate data, conduct their own fieldwork, interpret data collected, and finally write up their research results in the form of a report. The second aim of SRA was to demystify the research process by giving students an opportunity to learn how to do research by doing research. This was underpinned by an understanding that knowledge is enhanced by active engagement in the learning process (Plach & Paulson-Conger, 2007; Curry, Alminde, Bloom, & Cramsie, 2008). Our third aim was to bring into focus the practice of social justice, particularly that of listening to the voices of the marginalised and accepting multiple truths (Ledwith, 2007). We also wanted students to be impacted - and hopefully transformed - by the process of listening to other voices and stories (Brown, 2004; Merriam, 2008).

Since the students were doing independent research projects for the semester, our active mentoring approach, or teacher-as-coach model (Denning, 1999), was particularly relevant. For this course it meant reiterating aspects of the research process as preparation for practice and in the process balancing "authoritative and persuasive discourse"(Tabak & Baumgartner, 2004, p. 397). It also meant creating an environment which supported and encouraged student autonomy by creating time and space for students to voice their anxieties, excitement, frustrations and progress. Creating opportunities for practical assistance and guidance was also important (Withall, 1975). We also learned from students during the semester, not only about how our teaching practice could be improved, but from the new information students uncovered during their projects (Hargreaves, 2010).

Implementation of Social Research Advanced

The course was planned to run in first Semester to position students well for Internship applications and research projects during second Semester. A small group of thirty-one students enrolled and, as expected, the majority (63%) were doing SRA as a core course for their BSocSci. Students from other disciplines were also attracted to SRA, some having enjoyed the preparatory SR course the previous year, while others saw it as a solid foundation for postgraduate study. Of these non-BSocSci students, 13% were Psychology students, and 13% were Arts students with the remainder evenly distributed between Media, Education, Development Studies and an International student on exchange. The four students who failed to complete the course requirements were all BSocSci students who will need to so in the future and who withdrew for health (3) and employment (1) reasons.

Workshops at the commencement of the course were designed to show the students where we expected them to finish up at the end of semester. To this end students worked in small groups analysing a report on the student experience from the UK (Yorke & Longden, 2008) which, although more complicated than was required of them, contained all of the components of their project. That is, it gave them a literature review, sample questionnaire, as well as analyses of quantitative and qualitative data, and of course the structure of the final report.

From that starting point, lectures and assessment tasks were planned to simulate the way in which a live research project would be undertaken. Students were therefore required to undertake four assignments over the course of the semester and lectures prepared students for those assignments. As shown in Table 1, they would complete a literature review, a combined research proposal and ethics application, design their own survey instrument and prepare an interview guide. Finally, they would submit a Research Report after having conducted their fieldwork.

Table 1: Assessment tasks for the semester covered Literature Review, Ethics Application, Survey Design and Interview Guide, and Research Report

Assessment Task	Due Date	Weighting
Assignment 1: 500 word literature review & bibliography	Week 5	15%
Assignment 2: 1000 word Ethics Application	Week 6	30%
Assignment 3: Survey & Interview Instrument	Week 8	15%
Assignment 4: 3000 word Final Research Paper	Week 14	40%

When considering the timing of assessment, thought was given to the amount of work required for those first two preparatory assignments (Literature Review and Ethics Application) as well as allowing time for the field work. We decided that if students had submitted their second assignment (the Ethics Application) at the end of the mid-semester break, and their proposed survey instrument two weeks later (by Week 8), they would have ample time – 4 weeks - to complete field work before the end of semester. A further two weeks was then allowed for the analysis.

OUTCOMES

Two difficulties emerged for which we were unprepared, the first one being high levels of anxiety amongst the students about doing the first assignment, the Literature Review. For most students, the concept of a literature review seemed to be completely foreign, and even the strongest students were overwhelmed at the idea of looking up and reading the requisite thirty sources, and then condensing and synthesising the readings into a brief essay. Finding a 'gap' in the literature also initially caused much apprehension as several students who, on finding a gaping hole, wanted to abandon projects through concern they would not be able to substantiate an argument. Students also seemed reluctant to explore personal interests. For example, one student was passionate about the trend away from face to face tutorials and wanted to find out whether other students felt similarly, but she first procrastinated, and then obfuscated this interest by making the project about skills students learned in tutorials leading to improved collaboration in the workplace.

A second problem occurred because some students did not heed the warning they would need to begin their fieldwork immediately upon submitting their third assignment (the survey instrument and interview guide). The few students who let time lapse here found the student population had dispersed considerably towards the end of semester, or were too focused on their own assignments to want to help the SRA students. By contrast, those students who had moved quickly to their fieldwork had no difficulties in recruiting participants.

Although many students were initially anxious about recruiting research participants for their surveys and interviews, they used a variety of creative means to do so. Many were relieved – and surprised – to learn they could use a variety of non-probability sampling methods including convenience, purposive and snowballing (Tranter, 2010). For example, a few students contacted other lecturers and made arrangements to speak to classes, a particularly successful approach in recruiting participants. Those wanting to recruit International students also found this relatively easy as they attended social gatherings and spruiked their project there. Some found friends willing to help out by passing on the study details to others in their friendship network, including via social media.

Notwithstanding the initial fear manifested in the class, we were very impressed with the final results. Sixteen per cent of students received marks over 85%, a higher than average number for the courses we teach which would reflect the advanced level of the students in addition to their high level of engagement in this particular course. Other results were around average, with 29% of students receiving marks at the Distinction level (75%-84%), 26% in the Credit range (65%-74%), and 18% with a Pass mark (50%-64%).

Student Feedback

Student feedback for SRA was very positive from the fifty-seven (57%) or seventeen students who responded to a standard Student Evaluation of Learning and Teaching (SELT) questionnaire. Responses to the ten likert scale questions ranged from 7 Strongly Agree to 1 Strongly Disagree, and as the table below shows, six of the ten areas being assessed – clearly identified learning outcomes; strategies to engage learning; methods of assessment; the course helping to develop thinking skills; receipt of effective feedback; overall satisfaction with the course - were responded to favourably by 100% of the students.

As shown in Table 3, there were also four areas in which the overall response dropped from 100% to 94%, with at least one student dissatisfied or neutral in each. These areas – organisation of the course; the matching of workload to learning outcomes; the appropriateness of resources to help students; a learning environment cognisant of student diversity – are ones in need of improvement.

Standard Course SELTs also include two open ended questions: "What are the best aspects of this course, and why?" and "This course could be changed in the following ways to improve my learning." Responses to the first question from fifteen of the seventeen students (88%) coalesced around three main areas: being able to apply the theoretical knowledge they had been accumulating during their studies (5); usefulness of the course to future study or career (6); design and implementation of the course (6). Indicative comments are:

- Practical. Highly practical for my career later as a social scientist.
- Wanting to move through to honours, the course gave me a solid background to what some of the expectations would be & the skills to proceed.
- I like how the assignments build on each other. It provides a way of practical application of theories & provides meaningful insight into the research process.

Seven of the seventeen students (41%) completing SELTS had suggestions for improvement, all of which revolved around the need for more practical help – in designing online surveys, in accessing potential participants, with the ethics application, and with practising interviews and data analysis. Two example comments are:

- More guidance given for the ethics application – what is expected within each section.

Table 2: Student Evaluation of Learning and Teaching (SELT) feedback shows that 57% of SRA students were approving of six areas being measured, including overall satisfaction with the course.

Area Assessed	7 Strongly Agree	6	5
Clearly identified Learning Outcomes	59%	24%	18%
Strategies to Engage Learning	41%	29%	29%
Method of Assessment	71%	24%	6%
Helps to develop thinking skills	53%	18%	29%
Effective Feedback	53%	35%	12%
Overall Satisfaction	53%	35%	12%

Table 3: Student Evaluation of Learning and Teaching (SELT) feedback show four aspects of the course in need of improvement: organisation, workload, resources and an inclusive environment.

Area Assessed	7 Strongly Agree	6	5	4 Undecided	3
Appropriate Resources used	47%	29%	18%	6%	
Course is well organised	53%	35%	6%	6%	
Student diversity catered for	65%	18%	12%	6%	6%
Workload is appropriate	53%	29%	12%	6%	

- Maybe more effective tutorials, like mini activities that practice research skills, such as practice interviews on classmates, practice survey designs, or practice data analysis.

That some students were keen for more practical assistance matched our observations as the course proceeded: while students were enthusiastic about doing an independent research project, they were also very apprehensive. We have therefore decided future SRA workshops will be designed around the 'mini activities' suggested above, and we will factor in more milestones to temper student anxiety. For example, requiring students to complete an annotated bibliography prior to working on their Literature Review, and having them do formal verbal presentations of their research proposals prior to completing their Ethics Application/Research Proposal may allay fears somewhat.

CONCLUSION

In a climate driving the vocation orientation of contemporary higher education, it is necessary to be pragmatic. To this end we have been attempting to strike a balance between the development of skills required by employers, and the enhancement of critical thinking skills which are the hallmark of higher education, particularly in the Social Sciences. The introduction of Social Research Advanced into the restructured Bachelor of Social Science is one innovation we have introduced for this dual purpose.

In the inaugural 2012 class Bachelor of Social Science students were provided an opportunity to round off their degree program by completing an independent research task. This project required them to work through the entire research process from design, literature review, ethics, data gathering and analysis, and presenting a research report. Despite the limitations of our small sample size, what we have demonstrated is that students enjoyed the challenge and freedom to work on their projects but some simultaneously felt anxious and required more assistance than we had envisaged. What we have discovered, therefore, is the need to improve the course in order to reduce student anxiety and enhance the overall experience for them. Ongoing critical reflection will also be required to ensure a balance is maintained between developing skills desired by employers, and those required to critique the social order.

Acknowledgements

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