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Beyond Lectures: Insights from Business Discipline-

(Reflections, Transformations, and the Human Side of Teaching)

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FROM CONFUSION TO CURIOSITY: INTRODUCING RESEARCH METHODS TO UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

Nurul Aien Abd Aziz, Aflah Isa, Nik Nur Shafika Mustafa

Introduction

Research methods are often perceived by students as one of the most difficult and intimidating courses in higher education. Many students associate research with complex statistics, rigid academic writing, and unfamiliar terminology. As a result, they frequently approach the subject with anxiety and low confidence. In business and management education, however, research skills are essential because they enable students to analyse problems, evaluate evidence, and make informed decisions. In today's knowledge-driven economy, organisations increasingly rely on data, systematic analysis, and evidence-based reasoning to guide their decisions. Graduates entering the workforce are therefore expected to be able to evaluate information critically, interpret data, and make well-informed judgments. Research methods courses play an important role in developing these competencies, particularly for students in business and management programmes.

Despite its importance, research methods are often viewed by students as a challenging and intimidating subject. Many students believe that research is only conducted by academics or scientists and that it requires advanced statistical knowledge. These perceptions often create psychological barriers that discourage students from actively engaging with the subject. From our experience as an educator, introducing research methods to undergraduate students requires more than delivering theoretical content. It involves reshaping students' perceptions of research and helping them realise that research is not merely an academic requirement but a practical tool for understanding real-world problems. Students tend to respond more positively when they realise that research skills are not confined to academic environments but are widely applied in everyday decision-making processes. For example, businesses use research to understand customer behaviour, evaluate employee performance, and analyse market trends. When students recognise these real-world applications, research begins to appear less abstract and more relevant to their future careers.

This reflection discusses our colleagues' experiences of introducing students to research methodology through a more engaging and human-centred teaching approach. Rather than concentrating solely on technical components such as statistical techniques or specialised terminology, this approach seeks to make methodological learning more accessible and meaningful for students. By linking theoretical ideas with practical experience, students can gradually build confidence and develop a stronger interest in the inquiry process. The purpose of this reflection is to share insights into how educators can help transform students' fear of methodology into curiosity and active engagement. Through reflective teaching strategies, practical activities, and real-life examples, methodological learning can become a meaningful educational experience rather than a stressful academic requirement.

More broadly, this reflection considers how students' initial confusion and anxiety about methodology may gradually develop into curiosity, confidence, and active engagement through supportive teaching practices. This movement from confusion to curiosity reflects an important shift in students' learning experiences and highlights the central role of educators in guiding them through the process.

Students' Initial Perception of Research

One of the first observations in teaching research methods is the negative perception many students have of the subject. During the first few weeks of the semester, students often express concerns such as "*research is too complicated*," "*statistics is scary*," or "*I don't know how to start a research project*." These reactions are common, particularly among undergraduate students who have limited exposure to academic research. Many students enter the classroom with the assumption that research is inherently difficult and requires specialised knowledge that they do not yet possess. This perception often leads to hesitation and a lack of confidence when they are asked to develop their own research ideas. Some students even believe that research is only suitable for individuals who excel in mathematics or statistics.

Such perceptions usually stem from a lack of familiarity with the research process. Students tend to view research as something only academics or scientists conduct, rather than as a structured approach to answering questions and solving problems. In reality, research is closely related to everyday decision-making processes. For instance, individuals frequently gather information before making decisions such as choosing a university programme, comparing products, or evaluating the credibility of online information. These activities involve collecting evidence, analysing alternatives, and making informed conclusions, which are essentially simplified forms of the research process. Recognising these initial perceptions is important because it helps educators design teaching strategies that reduce anxiety and encourage participation. Instead of immediately introducing technical research terminology, educators may begin with simple questions that stimulate curiosity. For example, asking students how businesses understand customer behaviour or how organisations evaluate employee performance can naturally lead to discussions about research design, data collection, and analysis.

This approach helps students realise that research is not an abstract concept, but a practical tool widely used in real life. As students begin to recognise these connections, their perception of research gradually shifts. The subject becomes less intimidating and more approachable, allowing students to engage more actively in classroom discussions and research-related activities.

Transforming research methods into a practical learning experience

One key strategy that has proven effective in teaching research methods is connecting theoretical concepts to real-world applications. Rather than relying solely on lectures, students are encouraged to explore research ideas based on issues that interest them (Younas et al., 2024). For example, students may be asked to identify a simple problem in their environment, such as factors influencing students' online shopping behaviour or the impact of social media on study habits. By starting with familiar topics, students become more motivated to explore research questions and develop basic research designs. Allowing students to select topics related to their own experiences also increases their sense of ownership over the research process. When students feel that their research topics are meaningful and relevant to their lives, they are more likely to invest effort and demonstrate greater enthusiasm in completing their research tasks.

Another useful approach is to break the research process into smaller, manageable steps. Instead of presenting the entire research methodology framework at once, students are guided gradually through stages such as identifying research problems, developing research questions, selecting methods, and interpreting findings. This step-by-step approach reduces cognitive overload and allows students to build confidence as they progress through the research process. Providing clear examples and demonstrations can further enhance students' understanding of each stage. For instance, lecturers may demonstrate how to design simple survey questions, develop interview guides, or organise data in a basic spreadsheet. These demonstrations help students visualise how research is conducted in practice.

Over time, students begin to see research not as a complicated task but as a structured journey of inquiry and discovery. As their understanding improves, students also become more active participants in discussions about research design and methodology. They start asking questions, proposing ideas, and critically evaluating research topics, reflecting a growing curiosity about the research process (Sabhi et al., 2025).

Encouraging active learning and student engagement

Active learning plays a crucial role in helping students understand research methodology. Traditional lecture-based teaching often limits student participation and may reinforce the perception that research is purely theoretical. When students are exposed only to lectures without opportunities to apply research concepts, they may struggle to connect theoretical knowledge with practical research activities. Therefore, incorporating interactive learning strategies is essential for enhancing students' understanding and engagement. To address this challenge, classroom activities can be designed to encourage discussion and collaboration. For instance, students may work in small groups to evaluate sample research articles, identify research objectives, or analyse simple datasets. These activities allow students to interact with research concepts in a more practical manner.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the teaching session shows how the lecturer facilitates classroom discussion while guiding students to understand the inquiry process and develop their own project ideas. Another effective strategy is the use of mini projects, where students undertake small-scale studies within a limited timeframe. This experience enables them to practise key skills such as designing questionnaires, collecting data, and presenting findings. Through these activities, students gradually build confidence in carrying out academic inquiry.

Presenting their findings to classmates also helps students strengthen their communication skills and improve their ability to explain outcomes clearly. This experience shows that inquiry involves not only gathering data but also interpreting and communicating findings effectively. More importantly, students begin to recognise the value of systematic inquiry as a means of understanding social and business issues.

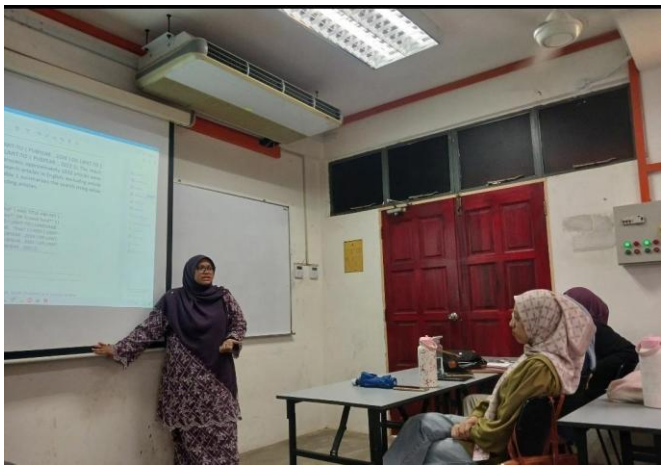

Figure 1: Facilitating discussion in a research methods class
(Source: Author's personal archive.)

The Human Side of Teaching Research

Teaching research methods also involves recognising the emotional and psychological challenges students face. Many students feel overwhelmed when they encounter academic writing requirements or complex methodological concepts. The pressure to perform well academically can sometimes create anxiety, particularly when students are unfamiliar with research terminology or academic writing conventions. Recognising these emotional challenges is important for educators who aim to create a supportive learning environment.

As educators, demonstrating patience and empathy is essential. Providing constructive feedback, encouraging questions, and acknowledging students' efforts can significantly improve their learning experience (Hong & Nacional, 2024). In many cases, students' attitudes toward research change once they realise that making mistakes is part of the learning process. When educators create a supportive learning environment, students feel more comfortable experimenting with ideas and exploring research topics. This human-centred approach emphasises that research is not only about producing academic outputs but also about developing critical thinking, curiosity, and intellectual confidence. When students feel supported and respected in the classroom, they are more willing to participate actively in discussions and share their research ideas without fear of making mistakes.

Lessons learned from teaching research methods

Educators play a role that extends beyond the simple delivery of knowledge (Altes et al., 2024). Providing both emotional and intellectual support can enhance students' learning experiences and foster a more positive disposition towards research. These experiences indicate that effective teaching of research methods depends on balancing academic guidance, practical learning opportunities, and emotional support. When educators cultivate a supportive environment that promotes curiosity, experimentation, and open discussion, students are better able to develop confidence in exploring research ideas and shaping their own inquiries.

Conclusion

Introducing research methods to undergraduate students is both a challenge and an opportunity. While many students initially perceive research as difficult and intimidating, effective teaching strategies can gradually transform this perception. At the beginning of the course, students often approach research with uncertainty and anxiety, mainly because they associate it with complex statistical analysis, unfamiliar terminology, and demanding academic writing. These perceptions can create psychological barriers that discourage students from actively engaging in the learning process.

However, when research methods are introduced through practical examples, interactive learning activities, and supportive classroom environments, students gradually begin to view research from a different perspective (Paudel & Shrestha, 2024). By connecting research concepts to real-life issues and everyday decision-making processes, educators can help students understand that research is not an abstract academic exercise but a practical method for exploring problems and generating knowledge. As students gain exposure to the research process through guided activities such as developing research questions, designing simple studies, and analysing basic data, their confidence in conducting research begins to grow.

Active learning strategies also play an important role in supporting this transformation. Activities such as group discussions, mini research projects, and collaborative analysis tasks encourage students to participate more actively in the classroom. These experiences allow students to interact with research concepts in a practical and meaningful way, making the learning process more engaging and less intimidating. Over time, students develop curiosity about the research process as they realise that research is essentially about asking questions, exploring ideas, and seeking evidence-based answers. Finally, exposing undergraduate students to research methodology is an important step in preparing them for future academic and professional challenges. Beyond fulfilling academic requirements, research skills foster critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and problem-solving. When students move from confusion to curiosity, research methods become not only a subject they must learn but also a valuable intellectual tool they are eager to apply to understand complex issues in both academic and real-world contexts.

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