Getting Over the Hump: A Position Paper on Junior Level Research

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Abstract

The role of research methods courses is examined in this essay. Several "facts" are offered concerning research methods courses and four myths are examined for their role in the teaching of research courses in communication.

In a recent article Mark Hickson and I (1991) posited that communication students wanted to know about the world around them. We posited that the "process of constructing a means for answering the questions posed. . . .employing a way to understand the *data* most often compiled in answering such questions—begins with the research process" (p. 351). This essay expands upon this argument and focuses on four myths commonly found concerning students and research courses.

Underlying these myths about to be presented are several "facts." The first "fact" is that today's student is not only a product of an "information society," but is and will be a producer in that society. Today's students must face a much larger data base than we did at the same stages in our careers. Compared to our parents ability to gather and assess data, we faced at that time monumental changes in how to *think* about data, information, numbers. Thus, we might consider today's students to be somewhere in the middle of the "super highway" of information processing.

The second "fact" is that information must be obtained, processed, and evaluated for it to be any good. The more information accessible, the greater is the pressure to include as much as possible in answering whatever questions we have asked. (Note here that I am not trying to assess what a "good" research question is; "good" research questions are becoming more difficult to identify as we are faced with making more decisions about the information we receive.) This ties in closely with a third "fact." To understand research the student must *first* understand theory (c.f., Hickson & Stacks, 1993; Stacks, Hickson & Hill, 1991). Thus it follows that the research course should be the second, not the first class the student takes in the communication major. The impact of this is that the communication major should possess a *basic* understanding of theory and research *before* taking advanced or even performance courses—courses that require the student to obtain, evaluate, and process information.

Given these "facts," let's turn the discussion to four myths that we tend to make about students and research methods courses. I have obtained these in a very nonquantitative way, I have talked with those who teach research methods courses to undergraduates and listened to their descriptions of the course and their students. It is my contention that overcoming these myths will lead to a better understanding of how to get students through the research methods course. I discuss the following four "myths" with my junior-level communication research methods students as part of my first day of class.

Myth #1: Research is Math

Myth #1a. *Most students enter a research methods course believing that they will are facing a statistics class.* In some instances they may be guessing correctly; however, most undergraduate research methods books make statistical analysis a secondary concern. Instead, and rightly so, they concentrate on primarily on how to acquire the data that will be later analyzed via some statistical (counting) procedure. The focus of the successful research methods course is on understanding how and why we ask research questions (this is an extension of the theory course) and then how we can *best* collect data to test those questions. Thus, the very thing that communication students should be good at—posing questions concerning the human condition—is what we should be emphasizing.

Myth #1b. *Students don't like numbers.* While I have found a few students who truly fear numbers, most have grown up with numbers in a way that many of us never imagined. Quite simply, today's students accept numbers as a way of doing things, of evaluating. It often comes down to the "I have more of this than you do" type of analysis. Simply put, today's students may put more faith in numbers than many of us do today. But students not only have a better grasp of numbers than many of us did at their age, they also accept them much better. I remember my first "numbers" course, feeling that numbers really couldn't *actually* mean something (and as I have learned, they don't, they serve as place holders for something else). Today's student accepts numbers.

Myth #1c. *Students cannot do math, therefore they cannot figure how to analyze numbers.* Unfortunately, this myth may have some truth to it. Discussions with other research methods teachers have brought home the realization that, while today's students can add, subtract, multiply, and divide (well, maybe not divide), they have very difficult times deciding how to analyze numbers. This has nothing to do with mathematics; it has to do with the underlying logic associated with making sense of numbers. Here we are talking about the analysis of data collected via a particular method. My students—and those of others I have talked with—can do the menial mathematical work required in most statistical tests; unfortunately, they have very difficult times deciding on which test is the most appropriate to run. Thus, research methods becomes a difficult class.

Myth #2: Research is Memorization and Computation

Following closely is the myth that *research requires students to memorize and compute complicated formulas.* This myth is similar to the myth we learned as children about the number of miles our parents walked to school in four-foot deep snow. Since the advent of the computer, beginning with the late 1960s mainframe and continuing to the palm top computer, the requirement to memorize and hand compute research findings is outmoded and unrealistic. It is much more important that undergraduates understand what and why they are choosing particular methods or analytical procedures than being able to recite from memory and various formulas and then compute them. More advanced students, especially at the doctoral level, may require this, but not

undergraduates. Instead, they should have a good conceptual understanding of why we choose the particular analytical procedures we do.

Given access to computers and personal computer software that will conduct almost any quantitative (and some qualitative) analysis requested, research methods courses should spend more time on *why* we run the particular analysis then on the detail involved in computing it. It is also important that the student can read a computer's print out (this they seem to be able to quite readily—they view it as a case study—but still have a difficult time deciding which analyses to run to get that printout).

This train of thought falls back on the notion that the theory underlies the research question, the research question frames the method to be employed in answer the question or hypothesis, and that dictates the particular analytical tools used. Simple, conservative, and most difficult for undergraduates to grasp. Overcoming the myth of computation makes the research methods course more a means to an end than some mountain that must be scaled to receive a degree.

Myth #3: There is No Career Connection to Learning About Research

Many communication students see no real connection between research and their later careers. I find it interesting that, while the business student understands the relationship between research and selling or buying a product, our students have difficulty grasping why we even consider quantitative research. Debunking this myth requires the instructor to apply research to "real world" situations. Thus, the experiment, the darling of many researchers, is extremely difficult for undergraduates to understand. Their question most often is, "How does this deal with what I see in the real world?" Answering this simple question involves a lot of work. I find that my students accept and understand such methods as participant observation (as used in intraoffice communication), focus groups (as used in group interviews about a product or concern), surveys (as used in political or marketing campaigns or advertising), or even content analysis (as used in understanding the message itself) much more readily than experimental method. Why? Because they see a career connection to those methods that is limited in the experiment. I find that students considering careers in academia, in an advanced research methods course, are more open to experimental design.

Myth #3 is interesting in that many students who transfer from schools of business (see Myth #4, below) often do so because they cannot handle the two or three research courses required by most business schools. Perhaps we are not the only discipline where students have difficulty understanding the role and scope of research.

Myth #4: Communication Students Cannot Compete with Business Students

Myth #4 follows from Myth #3. Many of our students go into the business world where they are forced to work withto make sense of research findings. My answer to this myth is that I am training my students to manage the business student. Quite simply, a grasp of the principles of human communication provides our students with an ability

to see the larger picture, work within an organization composed of people not units, and use their understanding of persuasion and information flow to produce the best outcome.

This argument, however, suggests that our students may be tasking the business student, the MIS major for instance. In such a case communication students must be trained to ask the right questions, suggest the most appropriate method to answer those questions, and then understand how to interpret the data once it has been forwarded to them by the appropriate department. Thus, it becomes increasingly important that the communication student understand the advantages and limitations of not only methods but also analytical procedures. To gain this knowledge the research methods course must integrate examples from as many real world applications as possible. This is where actual research conducted by the instructor in the real world becomes invaluable. I go through what I do for people in the business world with my classes, providing sample materials, often having them conduct the same analyses I did. Many quickly find other questions that might have been asked ("secondary analysis") and then attempt to answer those questions.

Summary

This essay has addressed several problems associated with teaching research methods courses to undergraduates. Although not discussed, it has assumed that the research methods course is taught as a junior-level course. Based on the foregoing discussion, the course should be offered as early in the major as possible, even before the traditional "performance" courses where students must integrate and evaluate others' research in some way or another. I have attempted to debunk four popular myths concerning research methods courses. In discussing them during the introductory meeting of the course, I find that students' fears are reduced and many students later report that they are better able to focus on using the information presented in other classes or in what they feel will be their careers. Once this focus has been attained, students seem better able to "get over the hump" that once was a mountain. It is still quite a journey, but one is less difficult than originally thought.

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