

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Honors in Practice -- Online Archive

National Collegiate Honors Council

2021

Modeling Vulnerabilities in the Research Process

Rebecca Summer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchchip>



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Educational Administration and Supervision Commons](#), [Gifted Education Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Liberal Studies Commons](#)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors in Practice -- Online Archive by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Modeling Vulnerabilities in the Research Process

REBECCA SUMMER
Portland State University

Abstract: When honors faculty share experiences from their own research, students learn that making mistakes and trying again is an important part of the learning process.

Keywords: teaching research; scholarly method; faculty interviews; experimental design; Portland State University (OR)—Honors College

Citation: *Honors in Practice*, 2021, Vol. 17:255–57

For all our emphasis on independent student inquiry in honors curricula, students get limited examples of the inevitable bumps in the road of advanced research. In our courses, we typically assign published works, which means that the research students read about is complete, polished, and deemed successful by the broader scholarly community. What students do not encounter in these models of successful research are the many uncertainties, missteps, and revisions along the way. Students are familiar with these setbacks from their own learning experiences, but they often do not recognize that these are universal experiences—even for the accomplished scholars listed in their syllabi.

In my social science research methods class for second-year honors students, I have introduced an assignment to expose students to the many decisions and uncertainties of the research process. Students listen to six ten-to-fifteen-minute interviews I have conducted and recorded with other honors faculty. In each of these short interviews, I ask faculty members to briefly explain their area of expertise and describe in their own words a research method they employ in their work. I ask them to give an example of a research project in which they used this method and why they believed it was the appropriate method to answer their research question. I ask how their

own previous experiences and personal identities influenced the decisions they made and the types of information they had access to. I ask if they would have done things differently. In other words, I ask the professors to reflect on the same questions I ask my students as they embark on social science research for the first time. After listening to the interviews, students consider what was surprising to them and how they might apply what they learned to the projects they are working on for the class.

In developing research proficiency, this exercise has been successful for two main reasons. First, students appreciate hearing how the methods we cover in class are employed in real-world examples. While the examples we read in published works are certainly real as well, the conversational tone of the interviews and the explanations in plain language make the research feel more relatable and doable. Students hear the professors invoke debates we have had in class, and they realize that the concepts we discuss have practical applications.

Secondly, students find it helpful to hear about mistakes professors have made. As one student reflected on hearing about a misstep in a professor's research: "It helps me to remember that research isn't as clear cut as it seems and [professors] are also human." Another noted, "Research projects can be really daunting and there are a lot of decisions that you have to make as a researcher . . . it's nice to know that professionals have their own struggles and learning experiences." Students respond positively when professors show their vulnerability in this way, helping them see that failing and trying again is part of the learning process. Students are also then more likely to raise their own questions or concerns because they know that their professors can empathize.

This exercise has another benefit of introducing students to members of our broader honors community. The short interviews introduce second-year students to a range of professors and research areas in an efficient way, providing guidance as they consider seminars for their junior year and work toward their senior theses. I remind my second-year students that these brief interviews not only cover course content but are an opportunity to learn more about future teachers and mentors.

A collection of faculty research interviews—whether used as an assignment in a class or as part of orientation for independent student research—is easily adaptable and expandable. My students appreciated the audio format of the interviews as a welcome break from reading, video lectures, and Zoom meetings (this assignment took place during COVID-19 remote teaching),

but it would be just as feasible to provide interview transcripts or short videos. The resource is also easy to scale up and update as new interviews can be added to the collection and outdated ones replaced. This strategy is equally relevant across disciplines and would be particularly useful for interdisciplinary approaches; in multiple classes or for multiple purposes, it can provide opportunities for collaboration and consistency in honors curricula.

The author may be contacted at
rebeccasummer@pdx.edu.