Methodology of social research in academic teaching

Abstrakt
Metodologia badań społecznych w dydaktyce akademickiej
W artykule przedstawiono specyfikę nauczania metodologii badań społecznych z uwzględnieniem form dydaktycznych oraz typowych problemów, z którymi spotykają się studenci na zajęciach w ramach bloku metodologicznego. Opisano sposób prowadzenia zajęć o charakterze praktycznym, wynikający z wieloletniego doświadczenia dydaktycznego.

Słowa kluczowe: metodologia badań społecznych, statystyka, analiza danych

Methodology in the study programme
Training students in methodology is of key importance in social sciences, including sociology. It is commonly known that the reliability and quality of research results, depend on applying research methods correctly. It is necessary that students have the theoretical and practical knowledge on conducting research, regardless of whether they see themselves as theoreticians or practitioners of sociology.

The importance of broadly understood research methodology must be explained to students when they start their university education. They must be shown how to apply research methods, both in the near future (when writing their Bachelor’s and Master’s theses) and later, at work. As in Poland, only some sociology
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graduates work as sociologists sensu stricto, it is necessary to make students aware that they may occasionally be expected to apply sociological knowledge even if they pursue careers that are not closely connected with sociology; for example, they may be asked to do research for a company that employs them or to evaluate the results of some external research. It is crucial to show students that the knowledge of methodology that they acquire “today” may turn out to be necessary “tomorrow”, rather than in some indefinite future. This can be done by means of examples that demonstrate how methodology is used when writing diploma theses, as well as examples of what employers expect from sociology graduates.

As the knowledge and skills in methodology that students must gain are extensive, it is impossible to teach everything within one course. Therefore, teaching research methodology is commonly carried out within several complementary courses that together make up the methodology module, which is different for the 1st and 2nd cycle degree programmes.

How do I understand the concept of a methodology module? It includes not only courses directly connected with conducting research, i.e. Social Research Methods, but also courses that are related to other stages of the research process, i.e. Data Analysis and Statistics. Additionally, a course in Desk Research can be included in this module. Occasionally, the issue of selecting a sample is taught as a separate course. In my experience, the methodology module is sometimes divided into a much greater number of specific courses, e.g. Poll Data Analysis, Implementation of Field Studies, Focus studies, etc. Then the number of hours allocated to each specific course is considerably smaller than in the case when there are only three main courses: Research Methods, Data Analysis, and Statistics.

Courses that make up the methodology module are taught in various forms: as lectures (Research methods, Statistics), practical classes (Research methods, Statistics, Data analysis), computer laboratories (Data analysis, Statistics), and projects (Research methods). My experience shows that the optimal hourly relation between theoretical courses (lectures) and practical ones (classes, labs, projects) should be 1 to 3, or 2 to 3. In practice, it is not always the case, and so the number of lecture hours and practical classes is the same (this results in teaching too much theory), or there are too many practical classes (which is a better option, but still not perfect).

Implementation of the teaching process

Students find courses in research methodology challenging, as these combine some elements of the humanities and exact sciences. Learning research methodology requires the knowledge of mathematics (e.g. the concept of a function,
elements of probability theory, etc.), as well as a specific way of thinking and intellectual discipline; these qualities do not always characterise those specialising in the humanities. Courses in statistics and data analysis must be taught in computer laboratories (perhaps except for a lecture on statistics). When teaching practical classes, I try to introduce computer activities based on the IBM SPSS programme. I also inform students that they can use a free (very simplified) version of this programme called PSPP (downloadable from the Internet). During my classes, I use the recommended PGSS (Polish General Social Surveys) data set. As a result, students work on real data sets that provide some information about the Polish society. Because the IBM SPSS licence purchased by our university allows to install the software on personal computers, students have the opportunity to explore the data sets on their own at home and to find out the relationship between different variables (in fact, they rarely take advantage of this opportunity).

As to the Social Research Methods course, a well-tested method is project work. Students can prepare small research projects and then present them in the form of short reports. Each student suggests the topic that they want to work on, which is then discussed with the teacher and either approved or modified. Next, the student performs conceptualization and/or operationalization of concepts, presents a set of independent and dependent variables (this constitutes the key element of the project), formulates several research hypotheses and presents his research idea in the form of a flowchart. Students hand in printouts that contain all this information to the teacher. Each project is then discussed during classes: first, in small groups and then, a representative of each group presents the advantages and disadvantages of a given project. Next, we arrive at conclusions about what can be changed and improved. These suggested changes are summarised in points. Students have a defined time (usually 2-3 weeks) to prepare the corrected version of the project, which is then verified by the teacher. If I do not have any comments, the project is approved and a student passes it. However, if there are still some things to work on, I discuss them in the classroom for further improvement.

Students are informed at the very beginning that the projects they work on will serve as an aid to construct a research tool (usually a questionnaire). Time constraints usually force me to choose only one research method to consolidate, this usually being a questionnaire survey in the form of a standardized interview or a questionnaire. On the basis of accepted projects, students devise questionnaires on their own. These questionnaires are evaluated in the same way as projects – starting from group discussions, to conclusions reached together, and leading up to a revised version. From the very beginning, students also know that the questionnaires they develop will be tested during pilot studies. Students take on the role of interviewers and have to conduct at least 10 interviews. During the interviews,
they have to note their own comments as well as the comments made by the respondents, on the margin of questionnaire forms. Then they are asked to write reports of pilot studies. These reports are presented in the form of short papers during the classes. Students are also expected to come up with some suggestions about what could be possibly improved in their questionnaires. Finally, they hand in their revised questionnaires.

Practical classes in research methods cover also the use of other research methods, e.g. observation (this depends on the number of hours allocated to the course). I remember an interesting class during which we developed a preliminary observation form and then students, split into groups, went on a field trip to observe the behaviour of Romanian beggars (some time ago, Romanian gypsies begging in the streets were a common sight in Poland). The aim was to analyse “begging strategies”, and find out what techniques are used by beggars to maximize their profits. We were successful in implementing this aim. This way of teaching and learning is demanding both for students and for the lecturer but, as practice shows, it gives good results.

Classes in statistics are of the specific nature. Polish students tend to be biased towards this course and consider it to be very difficult and not of much use, as it is only theoretical. It is necessary to explain the role of statistics in the process of teaching research methodology, and to convince students that contemporary statistics, which makes use of computer software, does not have to be difficult or boring. Many students come to statistics classes believing that they will have to learn unintelligible definitions and useless mathematical formulas. I attempt to dispel their fears at the very beginning, ensuring them that what is important for me is practical knowledge, and not memorising definitions or formulas. I tell them that only necessary information that has practical application will be given during the lectures, and show them how the IBM SPSS can be used. During computer laboratory classes we focus on practice. At first, using the IBM SPSS programme can be a bit difficult for students (the majority have not worked with this type of software so far), but on the other hand, it is like entering the already familiar world of computer applications. As a result, their fears slowly subside, and they get interested in the subject. The case is similar with the course in Data Analysis, although the course objectives are different. It focuses on practical application of statistical knowledge and on giving students a broader insight into analytical aspects of the IBM SPSS (which is beyond the scope of the statistics course). The main aim of this course is to develop the skill of answering research questions, with the use of available data and data processing software. Students must find appropriate variables and select appropriate analytical and statistical procedures to solve the problem assigned. They should answer the research question and justify their answer with
statistical data. This is difficult, especially at the beginning. After completing easier tasks first, we move on to work on more challenging research questions, which gives students considerable satisfaction.

**Difficulties and how to overcome them**

What are the difficulties in teaching research methodology? Difficulties in teaching research methodology stem from different barriers that students have. These barriers can be divided into three groups: (1) mental barriers – students believe that research methodology is a kind of “secret knowledge” that is difficult and accessible only to the selected few; they also fear that they will not be able to meet the requirements of their courses, especially from the methodology module. Additionally, students of Master’s degree programmes are afraid that they are not well-prepared after completing their Bachelor’s programme (which is frequently the case); (2) computer difficulties – students need to use computer applications that they are not familiar with; additionally some of them lack general computer knowledge; (3) mathematical problems – many humanities students have difficulties with absorbing mathematical knowledge (during statistics classes), some of them show gaps in knowledge from secondary school.

These fears and barriers must be dealt with individually. For example, one of my students did not do well in the class and was frustrated because of that. She lagged behind the group. I talked to her (in front of the whole group) and explained that her problems stemmed from the barriers inside her and that I believed she was an intelligent and skilful person. I gave examples of other students who experienced similar difficulties and managed to overcome them. I gave her more support when she was working on different tasks during the class. Soon, she caught up with the group and at the end of the semester, she was among the best students, showing great interest in the course.

It is very important to comment on the work of students in a way that does not undermine their self-image or position in the group (unfortunately, this is not always the case at some Polish universities). I try to show my students that the problems they encounter are not exceptional, but rather typical, and I approach these problems with understanding and kindness. Only lowering the stress level can help. Sometimes, there are also exceptionally gifted students in a group. They find the assigned tasks quite easy and carry them out faster than others. It is important to appreciate those students, reward them for their efforts, showing the group that effort and commitment pay off. Obviously, there are also students that take no interest in acquiring knowledge, or in their studies and results. I am not a do-gooder: it
is enough if they meet the requirements of the course to pass it. I do not set them as a negative example, as this would not serve any purpose and is not the right thing to do. On the other hand, I try to show that I am ready to help them if they change their attitude.

Practical classes within the methodology module are not limited to computer work. Students have to complete work placements, which involve a considerable number of hours (360 hours). They are free to find the place where they want to do their work placement, so usually these are not research placements. For several years now, on my initiative, some students have done their work placement participating in the research conducted by the university in cooperation with the Lublin City Office. They have been responsible for carrying out questionnaire interviews (usually 30-50 by each person) and entering the data into spreadsheets. Such work placements usually take 1 – 1.5 months.

**Concluding remarks**

Teaching research methodology varies depending on the university. I have taught different courses in the methodology module at two universities and one private higher vocational school. In each of these institutions, the teaching process was different, both when it comes to the methodology courses taught, number of hours, availability of software, practical teaching opportunities, etc. The conclusion is that the strategy adopted for teaching methodology of social research must take into account conditions at a given university; it is difficult to “use” only one educational model. What should always be the same is the teacher’s commitment to the educational process and understanding for the difficulties that students must deal with.