Teaching resource: Teaching sociology with archived data

Incorporate research methods with analysing qualitative data

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Introduction

This teaching resource enables students to develop a number of skills:

- Students learn important research discovery skills including how to explore and search official websites.
- They learn about the specific restrictions on certain data, as well as issues of confidentiality and data protection when working with personal data.
- Through the exploration of data collections they learn about a wide variety of research methods.

In completing an assignment students learn to engage with a genuine, real-life piece of research. They are asked to complete specific tasks whilst working within word limits.

Introduction to this teaching resource

"Engage with a genuine, real-life piece of research."

The assignment

Tutors can use this resource to create an assignment that enable students to learn to engage with a genuine, real-life piece of research. They are asked to complete specific tasks whilst working within word limits.

Students also have to identify aims and objectives in a piece of research, summarise and evaluate research outcomes, as well as develop their own research questions.

They can follow a piece of academic research right through the data lifecycle, from conception to publication. Students are able to explore the whole process, from the proposal, research methods chosen and the pilots that are carried out, the questions that are asked, how interpretations are made and how this results in an academic publication.

These skills have particular applicability for students' future employability, particularly if they enter into an academic career.

This resource provides generic templates for both the tutor's pack and feedback sheets that can be adapted for courses in different sociological thematic areas. These are in MS Word so that they can be adapted as needed.

Previous assignments on health and crime are included.

Background

In October 2010, the Department of Sociology at the University of Essex and the UK Data Archive's ESDS Qualidata developed an assignment for the module Crime and Social Control which incorporated the use of research methods with the practice of accessing and analysing archived qualitative research data.

The initial step of the pilot project involved the mass registration of sixty students with the Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS). The assignment involved exploring the service's qualitative collections relating specifically to issues of crime and social control. The students

were required to examine the research methods used in the collections and to consider alternative methods and research questions. Finally they were asked to formulate a research question for their own third-year project. Students were encouraged to use ESDS teaching packs and thematic guides as additional resources throughout the assignment.

This TALIF-funded project took place in three stages, starting with a full evaluation of the pilot project. The second stage extended the pilot by developing online assignments for other sociology modules. The final stage developed an online template for additional assignments in new subject areas that can be adapted and used in other sociology courses and across departments.
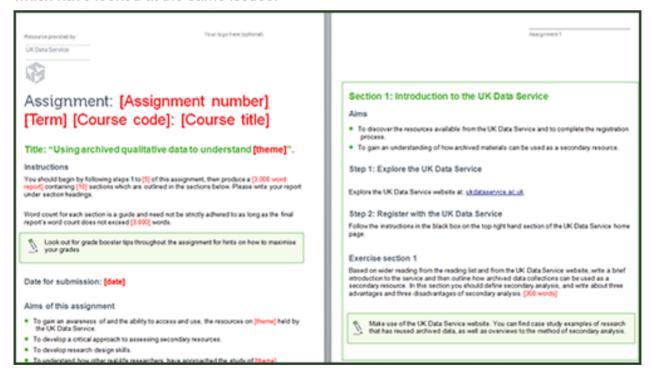
Details of the project can be found at: Using data in sociology teaching.

Assignment

"Look out for grade booster tips throughout the assignment."

The assignment is divided into sequential steps for students to complete. Each section sets out a specific aim and offers a suggested word count (in brackets) as a guide.

The overall aim of the assignment is to familiarise students with the UK Data Service's collections, learn about secondary analysis as a methodological strategy, and to learn about a selected thematic area through the exploration of archived qualitative research collections which have looked at the same issues.

The generic template is based on the two examples from Health and Human Sciences and Crime and Control.

The generic template can be tailored to any sociologically themed course. Simply adapt the template by changing the sections marked in red.

Assignment generic template

A tutor's resource is available which gives guidance on the assignment including sections with:

- instructions
- an introduction to the UK Data Service
- reusing archived data
- advantages and limitations of reuse.

Tutor's resource

There is also an accompanying range of thematic guides which can help with the selection of collections for teaching purposes.

Examples

"Assignments were distributed to students"

These assignments were distributed to students in the Department of Sociology at the University of Essex for courses held in Autumn 2011. Tutor feedback sheets are the accompanying mark sheets for both assignments.

Crime assignment

Assignment Autumn Term SC242-5-FY-CO: Sociology of Crime and Control

Tutor feedback: Assignment Autumn Term SC242-5-FY-CO: Sociology of Crime and Control

Health assignment

Assignment Autumn Term HS305-6-AU: Health Policy and Practice: sociological approaches

Tutor feedback: Assignment Autumn Term HS305-6-AU: Health Policy and Practice: sociological approaches

Project outputs

Project page - Using data in sociology teaching

Final report project - Teaching sociology at Essex with archived data

Case study - Getting sociology students into archived qualitative data

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