



Using social policy research in teaching: researching people with learning disabilities

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Course title: Available to final year students registered for a range of degree programmes.

Module title: Researching people with learning disabilities

Level: 3 (UG)

Year: 3

Background

This twelve week spring term unit is available to a range of final year students registered for different subject bases. To date students registered for Social Policy, Law, Sociology, Psychology and Politics have taken the module. A pre-requisite for the module is completion of a winter term module entitled 'Understanding people with learning disabilities'. The course is offered by the Tizard Centre based at the University of Kent. The Tizard Centre is one of the leading UK academic groups working in learning disability and community care. Members of the Centre are selected both for their academic record and for their practical experience in services. The Centre provides short courses and degree and diploma programmes at the University, taught at both the Canterbury and Medway campuses, and also undertakes an extensive programme of consultancy and research - both nationally and internationally.

Module aims

There are three guiding principles underpinning the teaching and learning in this module:

- to teach policy and theory with meaning and relevance i.e. to bring government policy on welfare alive

- to teach students a range of research strategies
- to enable students to learn actively through engagement with research.

Having taken the winter term module in 'Understanding people with learning disabilities' the students embark on more student focused learning in the spring term. Students choose the titles of the spring term lectures by submitting questions they would like answered. Questions have included: 'what does work mean for people with learning disabilities?'; 'how do I interview someone with a learning disability?'

Progression and development

Prior to the course the tutor contacts a range of bodies to see whether they are interested in commissioning short research surveys from the students (free of charge). Local Authorities have proved keen to be involved. This year's students, for example, will be looking to conduct research into the understanding and format of employment contracts which people with learning disabilities have.

Having identified organisations and small groups to work with, the tutor then matches each student with a person with a learning disability. Each student has three meetings with participants in the study. The first is a semi structured interview. The second is a session where the student works with the person with learning disabilities to produce a poster of what is important to them. The third is a meeting on campus where all participants are invited to a workshop, poster display and certificate presentation to participants, hosted by the University.

Before conducting interviews each student creates an ethical proposal and throughout the module they are required to reflect on issues which arise using a reflective diary. In addition, the group meets weekly to share their experiences.

After conducting their interviews the students undertake a quantitative analysis using SPSS and a qualitative thematic analysis of transcribed interview data. They also select ways to disseminate their findings. This year's students chose to disseminate using posters, power-point presentations and reports as well as by sending newsletters to the local services who had been supporting their work.

The tutor also found funds for a research dissemination trip to Lille where students presented their findings to their French counterparts.

Assessment

Assessment breaks down as 20% for a literature review (students must refer to two policies), ethical checklist and research protocol and 80% for a final project. The

project has to include a 10 point guide/protocol of what to do when in the field as well as a reflective component and a piece of analysis.

Two students produced end of module projects of publishable standards and five achieved first class marks.

Hot tips:

'Act quickly and decisively when networking across university and supporting bodies. There are pockets of money sitting unused in various university funds e.g. inclusivity funds; outreach funds'.

'Capitalise on links you already have when looking for student research projects'.

'Look for research opportunities in the communities you work with. Present the idea of free student research positively to these bodies'.

Feedback:

There has been 100% attendance by students throughout this module. Student comments include:

'Before I came to this year I thought I really knew it all ... I had an understanding of people, but doing this module I have realised that I didn't really know and I have learnt so much not only about people with learning disabilities but also about inequalities, race and gender – and my attitude to people around me has completely changed about things like accepting people and helping them participate in life ...it sounds cheesy but doing this course has changed my life .. and I will be able to use it in future employment'

Students also learned a lot from presenting their research findings to another culture:

'The trip [to Lille] was a really good opportunity to mix with another culture and receive their views on people with learning disabilities as well as provide ours. It was a really important dissemination process as it was clear that their views weren't the same as ours. Presenting the findings was a fulfilling experience to show other people what we had done, what we had found and what we had achieved'

Problems/issues

Having to think creatively year on year is challenging. Third years have enthused second years and this increases the pressure to deliver as good an experience. The module has grown in popularity and numbers are increasing. Larger groups will make it harder to sustain tutor/student relationships. There are also always issues associated with the ongoing developments of research governance.



**Social Policy
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