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# Teaching Note - Bring Class Concepts to Life: Implementing Intensive Interview Projects for Deep Learning

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# TEACHING NOTE

## Bring Class Concepts to Life: Implementing Intensive Interview Projects for Deep Learning

Kimberly E. Fox and Norma J. Anderson

Many of us are familiar with the statistics: at BSU, low-income (35%) and first-generation students, and students of color (21%), make up a significant part of our community. An even greater percentage of our students are commuters (~60%), juggling work and family commitments with education. As educators, we strive to make learning possible for all of our students so that they leave BSU prepared for work or further study in a highly competitive and globalized economy. We know that students learn best when they are actively engaged in their courses (through teaching strategies sometimes referred to as “active learning” or “learner-centered teaching”) and we know that student research has the power to change students’ lives. But designing and implementing courses and assignments that achieve these goals is not simple. How can we bridge the needs of students with vastly different interests and abilities, maintaining adequate time for course content while also teaching useful skills?

We do not claim to have *the* answer, but in this essay we want to celebrate a collaborative class interview project we each have implemented, with success, in three separate courses. Dr. Anderson used interviews in a course on the Anti-Apartheid Movement and in a Social Movements course and Dr. Fox implemented the project in a course focused on gender roles. The interview project was the focus of each class: we brought together course readings,

lectures, and content with methods preparation and data collection. We teach in the Department of Sociology but believe that this type of project could be adapted for courses in other disciplines, as well.

### Why Attempt a Massive Qualitative Course Project?

The goals for designing a course interview project were many. We wanted to do class projects that, as Arthur

Chickering proposed in 2000 in a *New Directions for Higher Education* piece, were collaborative group efforts, vital for building networks among students at commuter schools. We also wanted to pursue projects that could build on the readings, theories and lectures at hand and that would enable students to practice sociological methods—highly marketable skills when students go out on job searches, as scholars Kathy Charmaz and Kathleen McKinney have asserted in *Teaching Sociology* articles (1991 and 2005, respectively). Finally, we wished to deliver projects that would help students connect to other people’s lives and ideas. Interviews require that students really listen to others, learn about the incredible lives lived around them, recognize parallels to their own lives and experiences, and also, ideally, begin to see themselves as both researchers and actors who can make a difference in the world. Achieving these goals required significant planning, organization, and attention to detail throughout the process.

### Logistics: Making it Happen

Including a qualitative interview project in a university course delivers a variety of benefits to students but in order to complete the project successfully, instructors must attend to practical requirements of planning and implementation. The main elements of the project include pre-interview planning, student training, and wrapping things up.

Prior to completing the interviews, interview guides must be designed, participants must be chosen, and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval must be gained. Some of the logistics can be completed prior to beginning the class. For example, Dr. Anderson solicited the interview subjects prior to class by requesting individual participation through the

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faculty listserv and other networks, but Dr Fox allowed students to set up their own interviews after class had begun. It is imperative that students understand the ethical practice of research. To foster this, we held discussions of ethics in class and had the students review and sign the IRB application. Dr Anderson secured respondents' consent while Dr Fox had students do so.

The final component of pre-interview planning is developing an interview guide. We each used multiple class periods to design interview guides, starting with eliciting major topics of interest, then narrowing them down to specific questions, and finally editing questions to ensure they would work well for qualitative interviews. This process was particularly informative as it allowed students to decide what was interesting to them and important to their understanding of the course material.

Once the interviewees, IRB approval, and interview guides were set, the bulk of the work could begin. Students set up interview times, completed the interviews, and transcribed



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them. Student groups were each responsible for the completion and transcription of multiple interviews. These interview materials were then combined into one large document for all the students to review and code for patterns and themes.

### **Challenges: Managing the Chaos with a Light Touch**

Logistically, organizing a class in which students must go out and do work is never easy. Their schedules are full,

respondents' schedules are tight, and the semester has very obvious boundaries that do not allow much wiggle room. More than these simple concerns, though, are procedural issues. Our students are not professional interviewers—most have never done an interview at all. While this is part of the purpose of the project (to give them first-hand experience in data collection), it creates challenges. In semi-structured interviews, there are sets of questions, but if a respondent has a fascinating experience or story, we often go off-script, probing to learn more. Recognizing when to go off-script, as well as how to do it, is difficult for beginning interviewers: it usually happens when we walk away and think, *I wish I had asked more*

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*about that.* So getting students a little practice before they go into the field is important.

Students' relationships to participants can also cause difficulties. If students interview people they see as "authorities," they may be anxious to push for information or ask sensitive questions. Similarly, if students know participants well (for instance, family members), students may also be hesitant to ask difficult questions. What's more, they may also assume they know what the respondent will say, given their shared history.

Helping students learn to interpret the data is also challenging. The process of coding—in which we analyze the transcript data for patterns—is not strict. Each researcher will likely do it somewhat differently. Yet, there are common practices to avoid, such as over-generalizing the information and cherry-picking quotes to fit a pre-ordained agenda. Helping students analyze the data to find commonalities and patterns is imperative. Despite these largely procedural issues, the project has been overwhelmingly successful in teaching and reinforcing the content of the course, and in terms of building students' skills.

## Successes: Putting it All in Context

The logistical considerations and challenges make an interview project like this difficult but the potential for students to learn skills and concepts makes it worthwhile. Through informal course evaluations, students expressed their increased interest in learning about our methods, about connections between the classroom content and real-life experience, and about professional skills. One student noted the importance of this experience when

looking forward to graduate school in sociology, but even those without ambitions for advanced education found the project useful. One student noted:

the interview project was incredibly useful because it showed we are actually able to apply concepts we have learned in our sociology classes in the real world! ... all the concepts and skills we have gained

experience of what it is like to be a social researcher—not many classes give you this opportunity. Also, it helps you connect with what you learn in class.

The interviewing skills were an important learning opportunity but also helped students bridge class material with real-life experience. Several of Dr Anderson's students noted

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A student emphasized that class discussions and performing the interviews “helped me in my race and ethnicity class I am also taking this semester. I was able to use these discussions and knowledge to better understand that class.”

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from the interview project, will definitely help me with finding a career that is right for me.

Other students similarly mentioned that conducting interviews was a useful experience and noted the enjoyment of completing a project like this: “I have never done an interview project in any of my classes so I thought it was really awesome to be able and go out and record that kind of data” and:

At first I was anxious for the project—but in the end I found it enjoyable and a very exciting way to learn and come out of my “bubble.” ... it is important to do projects like this—for a few reasons. It gives you a hands-on

that talking with strangers about sensitive topics was uncomfortable but helped them learn to listen and to try to understand where people were coming from, rather than judging opinions or experiences different from their own.

The experience of seeing class concepts through the eyes of individuals was a common theme in all of the classes. In Dr Fox's gender class, students expressed the importance of listening to multiple voices: “hearing from women, and not just our professor, speaking about how they view gender, politics, and their family expectations spoke volumes.” A student from Dr Anderson's class on social movements said, “We were able to see how a

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movement we have been learning about has affected people. And hearing their own personal stories really made the issues faced more real.”

Students found concepts from the class present within their interview results, ones that “show how ‘doing gender’ has been around for a long time and the

Finally, students connected the ideas they learned from our classes and their interview projects to other classes and areas of interest. A student emphasized that class discussions and performing the interviews “helped me in my race and ethnicity class I am also taking this semester. I was able to use these

materials and real-life experiences and gained a rich, data-driven understanding of the work of sociologists and the lives we study.

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dominant society has been saying the same thing about it for more than fifty years but there seems to be no difference even with minor changes.” One student expressed surprise that respondents understood concepts from the class, saying: “Without knowing the concepts that we learned in class, the participants were able to connect their activism or stories with the goal[s] of the class. For example, one of my interviewees mentioned the importance of having or not having leaders in a social movement.”

discussions and knowledge to better understand that class. The interviews brought the material to life.”

While the planning, organization, and implementation needs of a massive course interview projects like these are many, the outcomes in terms of student learning, self-efficacy, and skill-building are worth the effort. Through the process, students learned to plan, implement and conduct interviews and they practiced coding and analyzing qualitative data. More importantly, they saw connections between the course



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