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Teaching Research through Critical Analysis Using "good" and "bad" Research

Abstract

One of the hardest undergraduate courses to teach is research methods. Dozens of books try to break down the research process but reading about how to conduct research can often be rather boring and abstract. I've been teaching research methods to undergraduates for nearly 10 years now, and what I have found is that students learn research best by engaging in the process of research themselves. Yet, can we really expect undergraduates to learn and implement all the steps involved in the research process in 12-15 weeks? Instead of using a conventional research methods book that tends to be dense and often leans heavily towards quantitative analysis, I have developed a course that focuses on linking methodology to theory, critically analyzing and breaking down existing research from various sources that is both excellent and lacking, and working through small tasks in class in order to introduce students to the research process. At the end of the semester, the main aspect of the research process that I expect that students to perfect is the literature review. This paper explains my teaching process, the challenges I have faced over time and the resulting changes I've made to the curriculum, as well as the ways that I evaluate student performance. I also include what I have heard from colleagues and others about what they expect from students in their research papers and the challenges of teaching undergraduates about research methods in political science. Finally, I also explore where we still have work to do to improve our teaching in this area.

Introduction

I have become comfortable teaching my students the research process. It has taken nearly ten years for me to be able to convincingly state this, but it is true. I am the one professor our majors cannot avoid, but students also see that I am comfortable teaching the research process, that I enjoy doing so, and that I can make it interesting, perhaps even fun, to learn how (and why) to conduct research as a political scientist. Every student who is a Political Science and Global Affairs major at my institution must take the dreaded *Pol 300, Political Inquiry and Analysis* course. Some put it off until senior year when it is hardly useful to them and when they are least likely to be willing to engage with the process, but my department has worked hard over the past 5 years, with the help of our College of Arts and Sciences Advising staff, to get the vast majority of our students in the class the fall of their sophomore year. Certain obstacles, such as study abroad or late declarations of major, still prevent some students from taking the course in their second year (and we only offer one section of the course once a year), but students who do come out of the course early in their university trajectory have, at least anecdotally, said they appreciate having the research methods course earlier rather than later.

I firmly believe that a course in research methods is essential for undergraduate Political Science majors because to engage with the discipline requires an understanding of the research process, its strengths, and its limitations. At the same time, I am fully cognizant that the depth of understanding of research methods and the ability to produce high quality research outcomes will be limited for many of our majors. This perspective is supported by the literature that shows increasing offerings of methods courses for undergraduates, more and more discussion on what and how to teach methods, especially in light of student skepticism, as well as the benefits of methods courses for all majors (Bachner and Commins 2012; Bos and Schneider 2009; Watson and Brown 2009; Turner and Thies 2009; Wahlke 1991). My goal in teaching students is to make sure they have a basic understanding of the process of research, including the theoretical underpinnings of research, how decisions are made, and the variety of methods, their strengths and limitations, that can be used in research. I also prepare students to be good consumers and critics of both political information, and more specifically, research papers they are reading, as well as better research producers in an undergraduate setting. The way I foster these learning outcomes for students is to design a course in research methods that utilizes a *Scope and Methods* approach focused on integrating theory every step of the way, practicing hands-on skills within the classroom and in assignments, and scaffolding assignments that produce a literature review focused on a class-defined research question. All of these methods are supported in the literature (Mikell 2019; Fisher and Justwan 2018; Bernstein and Allen 2013; Bos and Schneider 2009; Shields and Tajalli 2006) My overarching goal is that students leave the course better prepared to produce research papers in their remaining upper division social science courses, better prepared to critically analyze the political information they consume as students, employees, and citizens, and better prepared for graduate school if they continue on in higher education.

What works, and doesn't work, for Students?

The Dreaded Methods Course

We know many students are reluctant to take a course in research methods (Fisher and Justwan 2018; Bernstein and Allen 2015). Why might this be so? First, in my experience, the students see it as different from other Pol courses. And, they are not wrong. The content is very different compared to a course on, for example, *Politics of Africa* or *American Political Thought*. They are afraid it will be boring or useless, or both. And, they talk to one anotherⁱ. Attitudes form over time as seniors interact with freshmen and sophomores. This can also work in our favor as students who come through methods courses can give younger students positive feedback if the course is done well. Bos and Schneider (2009) explored the barriers students identify, specifically related to quantitative methods, while also exploring professors' perceptions of those barriers, and suggest a number of best practices aimed at overcoming students' negative attitude towards research methods. One thing they do find is that there is a disconnect between why students feel barriers to learning research methods and what professors perceive are those barriers (Bos and Schneider 2009). Understanding our own students and their fears is an essential step in winning them over to the idea that learning research methods is useful, can be fun, and will help them in their upper division courses as well as the "real world."

What to teach? Changes in strategy over time

As others have noted, most generalized research methods textbooks overrepresent quantitative methods, specifically teaching statistical methods up to multiple regression, while fewer emphasize in detail qualitative research methods (Elman, Kapiszewski, and Kirilova 2015). I've also found that few include much discussion of the importance of theory to the research process. Though there may be disagreement about breadth versus depth, as well as about sequencing of topics in teaching research methods (Elman, Kapiszewski, Kirilova 2015; Turner and Thies 2009; Dell and Nakazato 2007), there is an abundance of literature on best practices in teaching research methods, including numerous publications to come out of the APSA Teaching and Learning conferences that have emphasized basic information literacy skills, sequencing of assignments and topics, hands-on skill development through assignments, and integrating research methods across courses in a program (Watson and Brown 2009; Bachner and Commins 2012). Further, in their survey of 106 teachers of research methods, Turner and Thies (2009) identified 6 individual topics that over 90% of respondents include in their courses, and an additional 9 topics that 54%-84% of professors also includeⁱⁱ. Interestingly, of the 15 major topics most teachers of methods include in their course, I introduce 13. Given that I have privileged breadth in my course, I also include 4 of the additional 11 topics that Turner and Thies (2009) included in their surveyⁱⁱⁱ. One thing I find curious is that Turner and Thies (2009) did not offer "theory" as one of the potential topics for a research methods course. Below I discuss how my course teaching research methods to undergraduates has evolved over time, why I've made the decisions I have, and how the literature supports my approach.

When I first taught our research methods course almost ten years ago, I adopted a standard textbook, half of which as devoted to learning statistical methods up to and including multiple regression. I used

the basic assignments included with the text and created lectures and Power Points that followed the book's dry and detailed instructions for doing research. The course was a colossal failure for the students and for me. I felt unsure of myself and I knew the students were not engaged, even though they dutifully showed up (most of the time) to sit through class twice a week. After my third attempt, the course got better because it became more familiar to me, but it was also still deeply dissatisfying for the students and for me. I kept tweaking things here and there, especially assignments, and reducing the amount of statistics that I felt compelled to include in the course. Around this time I had an epiphany: my approach was all wrong. In order to learn research methods, one had to do research. And, not in some formulaic way that the typical textbook demonstrates with disconnected assignments. One had to engage in the process in a meaningful and interesting way. Elman et. al. quote Druckman's (2015) assertion that students at liberal arts institutions like mine should provide students with "the tools needed to address and resolve problems in a variety of domains," and they agree that students are going to better acquire these tools if they are engaged in active learning rather than passive absorption of material (2015). I was instinctively understanding at that moment what has been realized and increasingly vocalized over time within our profession. After this revelation, I made the first major overhaul of the course.

For two consecutive years in *Political Inquiry and Analysis*, I integrated a research project focused on norm compliance under the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme and Voluntary System of Warranties within the diamond industry to ensure conflict diamonds stayed out of the supply chain. The great thing about this project was that the students were involved in data collection and analysis of a research project that had the potential to be published (it was)^{iv}, but even more importantly, the students were able to see through this project the obstacles that sometimes arise when doing research. In this case, the obstacle was that only a very small percentage of respondents to a phone survey that the students had conducted were willing to complete the survey all the way to the end. This led to a great learning moment as we talked about the problems of conducting such research, what the limitations of trying to work with minimal data were, and what we might do next to try to augment the data because the basic research question and methodology were sound.

This got me thinking about next steps in the methods course, which I still revised every single time I taught it, trying new textbooks and new assignments. Over time, I reduced the amount of class time devoted to statistical analysis reasoning that, given the time constraints inherent in a semester course, I could not possibly hope to have students obtain a competency in statistics in a few weeks of coursework. My choice became to either expand the amount of time on the topic and cut out the importance of theory to research and limit the scope of methods I presented, or to cut out teaching statistical methods altogether in favor of teaching students how simply to read statistical tables, so that I could focus more on the underlying purpose of utilizing a theoretical approach and a methodological process in learning how to conduct research. Given that we encourage our majors to take Statistics to fulfill their math requirement and my own more qualitative approach to research, I chose the latter. So, I revised the course yet again. I also dropped the dry textbook that students hated in favor of a different approach.

Around this time, I realized that one of the best tools I had at my disposal was a poorly developed research paper presented several years ago at a regional conference on a panel for which I happened to be the discussant. This paper was in one of my areas of expertise (ethno-political conflict), and after my experience with the students participating in the diamond industry norms project, I decided to experiment with utilizing this methodologically poor conference paper as a learning tool for my students. My own research project at this time, a content analysis project focused on East African land issues and leadership approaches, was and remains, less conducive to student assistance^v, so working with a paper that was only partially thought out seemed an ideal tool for student engagement with the research process. In utilizing this paper as a learning tool, I was teaching students not only methodological steps, but also “engaging with the project’s motivating epistemology” that Elman et.al. suggest is a key obstacle to working with undergraduates on research projects (2015). Around this time, I also found a book I find extremely useful to my *Scope and Methods* approach to teaching the research process. Akan Malici and Elizabeth S. Smith’s *Political Science Research in Practice, 2nd edition* (2018) presents nine research projects in which the authors detail their methodological decisions, obstacles to their research, and outcomes in an accessible way that demonstrates how political scientists think about the research process. This is one of the major goals I have for my students: to be able to think about the research process as a political scientist. Malici and Smith’s book helped me visualize scaffolded assignments utilizing the conference paper (I’ll call it Paper E)^{vi} that I wanted to use as the exemplar for student learning.

Assignments

Of the nine courses that I have prepared and taught in the past 15 years, the research methods course is the most labor intensive. First is the aforementioned student resistance to the course. Second, there are multiple scaffolded assignments related to the end-product that require extensive comments, meetings with students during office hours and, often, hours required to rethink and reframe explanations of the material as I adjust to each cohort of students and their particular struggles. But, the amount of time I put into this course, especially into helping guide students along the way in writing their literature reviews is greatly appreciated by students and has led to improved outcomes over time, as detailed below. Doing research is hard, and labor intensive, and I’m extremely forthcoming with students about the challenges that research projects can present. Giving students numerous examples of my own struggles along the way helps them to feel better about their own challenges, but also gives them confidence that the learning process will bear fruit with time and effort.

The first assignment that students complete is a critical response to former Senator Tom Coburn’s legislative attempt to remove funding to political science research through the NSF (Coburn Amendment 2631)^{vii}. I feel this is an important assignment for the students because through it, they recognize the logical fallacies of certain critics of social science research, they must examine bias (their own and Coburn’s), and they must effectively defend the importance of political science research. If students do not believe in the importance of the discipline, then they need to rethink their choice of major. It is a good exercise in picking apart arguments and sets the tone for future assignments related to the research process. Book-ending this initial assignment is the students’ cumulative final product: the

literature review. The reason I focus on a literature review is that I want the students to think through why theory is important to research, why we must understand how the existing literature relates to our projects and why we need a theoretical framework. One aspect of the course that I have not changed in several years is its devotion to theory. Always looking for better texts, in 2012, I discovered the second edition of *A Good Book, in Theory: Making Sense Through Inquiry*, by Alan Sears and James Cairns (now in its third edition), and ever since I have spent the first two weeks of the semester focused on the lessons Sears and Cairns introduce in their short and extremely accessible book about the importance of theory to understanding the world.

Sears and Cairns suggest that we could not exist in the world without focusing ourselves, categorizing our observations, and practicing “every day” theorizing (2015). The difference between everyday theorizing and the kind of theorizing we do in political science research is the degree of rigor that we apply. They write, “[the formal theories developed in scholarly study and through social movement activism often have a penetrating power because they reflect a broader view developed through interchange over time and a [sic] live up to a more rigorous set of requirements for internal consistency and fit with the world (Sears and Cairns, 2015).” I carry a focus on theory throughout the course and reintroduce its importance in nearly every discussion about methodological decision making that we hold in class. The importance of theory to the research process cannot be overstated (Elman, Kapiszewski, and Kirilova 2015), and this gem of a book helps students to understand why I keep insisting they utilize a theoretical framework in research projects as well as why I focus on a literature review as their final project. Aligning with my own views, Shields and Tajalli (2006) quote Abraham Kaplan and John Dewey’s arguments about the importance of theory in teaching about empirical research. They write,

One of the unique facets of Kaplan and Dewey’s approach is the extraordinarily tight connection between theory and practice. Theory is used to organize the exploration of the problem at hand. Dewey and Kaplan’s key insight is that, without the problem there would be no need for theory. Conceptual frameworks are connected to outcomes or problem resolution because they aid in making judgement. Theory includes the ‘logical instruments’ of reaching judgment (Dewey 2938, 283). (Shields and Tajalli 2006)

I follow this philosophy when teaching theory in a research methods course, and I am highly skeptical that most traditional research methods textbooks pay scant to no attention to understanding the theoretical underpinnings of research. And the students get it. One student in the Fall 2018 course commented that the instructor “made great use of examples and class exercises that grounded theoretical or sometimes abstract material to the real world. Examples, specifically reflecting the current political landscape brought a useful context to the broad range of research approaches, theories and methods covered.”

After the focus on theory and the assignment defending the value of political science research, the next three graded assignments, examining Paper E in depth, developing an annotated bibliography based in the research question we develop related to the basic ideas of Paper E, and completing a draft literature

review for our research question, are scaffolded, another best practice within the literature (Fisher and Justwan 2018; Bos and Schneider 2009), to build towards the final product. Paper E suffers from a number of flaws. The research question is not well developed, there is no meaningful explanation for the case selection, the literature review misses some important research focused on understanding the causes of conflict, the independent variables are not well-defined, and the outcomes are speculative at best. I present the paper to my students as a challenge: I suggest that together we can work through this paper to improve it, and that they collectively can come up with a solid research question and individually produce an informative literature review that would form the framework for conducting a better research paper than what was presented at that conference I attended all those years ago. I also discuss ethics in research by focusing on what we should or should not reveal about Paper E, how we give credit to the authors for their ideas, and whether it is even ethical to utilize a conference paper as a learning tool in a course on research methods (I believe it is).

As I process the steps of research with my students, we practice coming up with strong, and realistic, research questions as well as good hypotheses^{viii}. We go over the introduction of Paper E together in class after they complete their critique of it which is difficult because some of the questions I have them try to answer are not actually answerable because of the flaws in Paper E (see Appendix I). We discuss what we've learned about writing a strong research question and how it relates to the research question proposed by the authors of Paper E (rightly, my most astute students have a hard time identifying the research question because it is not explicitly stated). Next, we work on coming up with our own version of a research question to address the main puzzle of Paper E (the impact of a former colonial power intervening in a civil war). After adequate honing and discussion of its merits, we settle on a solid research question that anchors their literature reviews. I utilize Paper E in a number of other non-graded exercises and assignments to teach how to link theory to methodology, conceptualize variables, select case studies, and come up with hypotheses. Having students find flaws in this paper is easy, but they get to exercise their knowledge about the research process in a hands-on way, and it makes concrete the theoretical underpinnings of research methods. This approach is exactly what recent studies suggest are part of the best practices of teaching research methods (Siver, Greenfest, and Haeg 2016; Bernstein and Allen 2013; Bos and Schneider 2009). Students appreciate creatively engaging with the research process during class. One noted, "I like how we were able to apply everything we did to real-world examples, it made the class more interesting," while another said the "[i]nstructor was not afraid to use unorthodox activities, which kept the class interesting."

Student Outcomes

Over the past three years of teaching *Political Inquiry and Analysis*, I have seen a marked improvement in the quality of the final course product, the literature review. Writing a literature review when you have not focused your brain for many years on a particular topic like we do in graduate school or our professional research, is difficult, but vitally important to our comprehension of the research process and to assess research outcomes. Students consistently remark that the process of writing their literature review was difficult because it was nothing like what they had written previously^{ix}. Students are generally used to coming up with an idea or thesis and developing a question around it, researching what

other professionals have had to say about the question, reporting out what those professionals found in their own research projects, and then concluding something about their idea. They rarely collect their own data, complete analysis, and draw conclusions on their thesis all while working within a specific theoretical framework. So, working at the theoretical level that is the literature review whereby they must analyze, compare, and contrast different schools of thought about their topic is rather daunting. I spend many minutes of many class periods simply trying to convey what the literature review is, and is not, and why it is essential for research^x. I've come up with a number of examples and exercises that help students get the gist of the literature review, but some struggle through the entire semester^{xi}.

The first couple of times I utilized Paper E in class assignments and exercises, I was still having students develop their own independent research questions that would form the basis of their literature reviews. But after careful review of student comments^{xii} and thinking about my own limitations in guiding some students' ideas in subfields unfamiliar to me, I decided that all the students should develop their paper on the same research question focused on Paper E's basic idea (impacts of former colonial ruler interventions in civil wars). Though some students would prefer to spend their semester researching something of particular interest to themselves, and though some of literature on teaching and learning suggests that students should work on projects of interest to them to help retain their enthusiasm for the project (Bos and Schneider 2006), the benefits to having everyone working with the same research question outweigh the main deficit which is that some students have no interest in the research question and find it hard to slog through a set of literature that doesn't really intrigue them.

The most recent iteration of this course was completed this past semester (Fall 2019), and I could not have been more pleased with the learning that has resulted. Student papers were, on the whole, the best I've seen, and I had also drawn a similar conclusion after assessing the literature reviews of my Fall 2018 students. In addition, I have had reports from my colleagues that they are seeing improvements in some students' research projects, specifically in students' capabilities in the area of completing a literature review. In addition, student self-assessment indicates that they feel more confident about how to conduct research after taking the course and that most of them understand the role of the literature review in a research project as well as how to write one. One student wrote in their evaluation at the end of the Fall 2019 semester, "The focus on the literature review really prepared me and set me above my peers in terms of research and writing," while another from Spring 2017 wrote "[t]he course has also proved useful in regards to improving my knowledge of how to perform research on a topic related to political science," and one student in the Fall 2018 semester noted that "having the final literature review being the same across all students, and allowing differences in how students go about researching it, is a better way to understand and do a literature review rather than all of us trying to find one on our own."

In running some basic analyses^{xiii}, I can say with some confidence that students in the most recent two courses (fall 2018 & fall 2019) show a significant difference in student satisfaction compared to the first years of the course. In particular, the mean score for student responses between 2012 and 2019 on questions related to *instructor was effective communicator, teaching methods effectively conveyed content, and instructor stimulated my interest*, were all statistically significant at the .001 level, while

valuable learning experience was significant at the .01 level. One curious result is that the mean scores from the early years to the last two years for evaluation responses to *assignments/readings helped me learn* was not statistically significant. This is not surprising as students generally don't enjoy reading about doing research, and not all assignments feed directly into the final product, meaning there are some stand-alone assignments that I still think are useful exercises, but that students may perceive differently. Finally, in comparing last year's student evaluations with this year's, there is no statistically significant difference in the answers to five basic questions, which I'm interpreting as two years in a row where I've seen the highest student satisfaction and best student learning of the course^{xiv}. From these two years of evaluations, students also commented specifically that they appreciated the multiple assignments feeding into the literature review, the extensive feedback that I give them along the way, my patience in covering difficult concepts and my willingness to switch gears when needed during class, my accessibility outside class, and the peer editing process that takes place before the final revision.

Next Steps and Future Assessment Plans

Now that I have revised our research methods course to the extent that I feel it is a meaningful, useful, and productive learning experience for our students, the next steps are twofold. First, I need to work with my colleagues to reinforce the skills learned in research methods in our upper division courses. We need to be more deliberate in integrating additional research methods training into our topical courses so that students continue to build their skills (Siver, Greenfest, and Haeg 2016; Bos and Schneider 2006). This could be accomplished through scaffolding assignments in the upper division courses based on the assignments that are introduced in Pol 300. Second, we need to work on our assessment of student skills. We have been going around and around on this question for a number of years, but never coming to a consensus. I would like to convince my colleagues to leverage the skills learned in Pol 300 to create a two-course series that includes one 400 level topical course with small student enrollment followed by a capstone independent study in which the students produce a research project that they begin in the topical course and are guided through by the same professor from whom they took the course. Student completion of a capstone has been shown to be beneficial to learning outcome goals (Hummer 2012). We need to better tie together the research methods course to other courses so that students don't feel Pol 300 is a stand-alone course and they feel that other professors can leverage what they learned in their methods course to better guide students to produce specific research papers in their areas of expertise. Interestingly, one student from the Fall 2019 course had a similar idea: "If I was the omnipotent god of the political science department, I would incorporate this course into a capstone research project, so that students could apply what they learned to a question that actually interested them." Perhaps we will listen to this wisdom from our student, and find our program strengthened because of it.

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Appendix I Assignments Explained

Assignment 1: Coburn's critique of political science (20 pts)

Write a 2-3 page response to the critique of your discipline that Coburn presents. You can support or reject some or all of Coburn's arguments against political science, and agree or disagree with his reasoning for rejecting funding for the discipline. http://crookedtimber.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/Coburn_NSF.pdf

Assignment 2: Foreign Intervention into Civil Wars Review (20 pts)

Critically assess the draft conference paper "Successful Intervention in Civil Wars: Former Colonial Status as a Missing Variable." Answer the following questions:

- What is their research question?
 - Write a short (1 paragraph) summary of their literature review
 - What cases did they select to review, and why did they select these cases?
 - Which independent (causal) variables are they focused on and why?
 - How do they conceptualize their dependent variable (successful intervention in civil war)?
 - What flaws can you specify with their methodological framework for answering their RQ?
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Assignment 3: Annotated Bibliography (20 pts)

Write a short summary of 5 articles that apply directly to your research question.

In addition to summarizing their relevance to your research question, you should also include an analysis of how the articles fit together (2-3 pages)

- Do they complement each other's arguments?
 - Do they use the same factors of analysis and how does this affect their conclusions?
 - Do they come to similar or different conclusion and why?
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Assignment 4: Draft Literature Review (35 pts)

Students should turn in a draft literature review that is organized by idea/theme and that has evidence of critical analysis of the literature that one is integrating. A good understanding of the debates in the conflict literature should be evidenced in this draft. From the grading rubric:

- Student is well on his/her way to completing the literature review; articles are directly related to the RQ, and student has integrated ideas, compared and contrasted concepts, and understands the purpose of the lit review: 46-50 pts

- Student is partially on his/her way to completing the literature review; some articles are directly related to the RQ, and student has partially integrated ideas, compared and contrasted concepts, and seems to understand the purpose of the lit review: 41-45 pts
- Student is not far enough along in completing the literature review; articles are insufficient, and student ideas seem muddled or incomplete, perhaps the student is confused about the purpose of the literature review: 40 or fewer pts

Assignment 5: Gathering Data to Chart Institutional Change (20 pts; due 11/28)

Before attempting this assignment, review Dr. Malecha's podcast on doing research, plus review the resource videos: Govtrack; Politico; Rollcall; Washington Post project; and Brookings.

Purpose of Assignment: Many scholars contend that today's Congress is dramatically different from what it was more than a half century ago. This assignment is designed to illustrate the use of data in charting some of the changes in the institution these scholars have identified.

Based on what you find in response to the items listed below, describe how today's Congress differs from its 1960s predecessor.

1. Representativeness of the institution. Here you should explore data that show how the institution has changed demographically – members' occupations before entering Congress, religious affiliation, gender, race – in the years between the 89th Congress and the 112th Congress?
2. Professionalization of the institution. Here you should explore the extent to which the institution has become more professional over the last half century. You should do this by examining the following:
 - Changes in the number of personal staffers serving the House (1967-2009) and the Senate (1967-2009).
 - Changes in the number of committee staffers serving the House (1970-2009) and the Senate (1970-2009).
3. Legislative Activity. As the institution has become more diverse and professional, has it become more productive? To answer that question, you will first need to operationalize legislative productivity (Hint: bills introduced and passed, time in session, hearings held and so forth). Justify your answer by comparing legislative productivity in 1960 and 2012.

Assignment 6: Group Presentation of Malici and Smith chapter or assigned article (35 pts)

In groups of 3 or 4, you will present one of the chapters from the Malici and Smith book or the research design of an assigned article. Students must explain what the research is about, why the researcher(s)

chose a particular research design and question, what the challenges that the researchers ran into, and finally come up with one research question that could be examined using a similar research design. Students will simulate the chapter or article that they reported on to speculate about what their own research design might look like.

ⁱ One student wrote in her/his Spring 2017 evaluations, “[t]he instructor did a great job of making a class that is predominately views as being one of the most boring classes in the curriculum into something that was not as bad as previous students stated it was.”

ⁱⁱ The topics, in order of most selected, are: measurement, elements of research design, logic of scientific reasoning, causality, sampling, survey research, components of a research paper, experiments, existing data sets, nature of social science, quasi-experiments, quantitative data analysis, research ethics, interview techniques, and case studies.

ⁱⁱⁱ The additional topics I teach are, comparative method, qualitative data analysis, ethnographic/field research, and policy/program evaluation.

^{iv} See Anne Pitsch Santiago “Guaranteeing conflict free diamonds: From compliance to norm expansion under the Kimberley Process Certification System” *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 2014 Vol. 21, No. 3, 413-429.

^v Elman, Kapiszewski and Kirilova (2015) discuss some of the limitations of working with undergraduates on rigorous research projects simply because students are neophytes regarding the broader and deeper project of social inquiry that their professors engage in.

^{vi} I make the paper available electronically to my students in its original form, having removed the authors’ names, date, conference information, and other identifying details. This paper is then used as our starting point for multiple assignments that cumulate in a literature review focused on the very research question that the paper authors’ were trying to work with.

^{vii} See: http://crookedtimber.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/Coburn_NSF.pdf

^{viii} Here I also have the students critique flawed research questions and hypotheses that past students came up with, making the current students say why these are flawed (the hypothesis is actually a research question, the research question does not address a puzzle, there are too many jumbled questions in one, it is not possible to realistically answer the question, there is confusion about cause and effect, etc) and try to come up with ways to improve them.

^{ix} For example, one student wrote in the Fall 2019 evaluation “Specifically with the Literature Review we worked on all semester, she knows that it is difficult work and so she is very patient when trying to teach her students how to write it,” while another student from the Spring 2018 course suggested, “[s]tart the meaty part of the lit review assignment earlier to allow for time to adapt to a new style of writing and organizing our work.”

^x I assign Lisa A. Baglione’s “Writing a research paper in political science, a practical guide to inquiry, structure, and methods” 3rd edition (2016), Sage, as a guide for students. Another good guide is Jose L. Galvan and Melissa C. Galvan “Writing literature reviews, a guide for students of the social and behavioral science” 7th edition (2017), Routledge.

^{xi} For example, one exercise I have students engage in is sending one student out of the classroom for a period of time while the rest of the students divide up into a number of groups and hold a discussion about the meaning of democracy. When the student comes back into the room, s/he has to try to discern the different “schools of thought” about democratic theory that have come out of the different group discussions, and then analyze their similarities and differences.

^{xii} For example, one student in the Fall 2018 course wrote “I appreciated that we had a set research question for the Literature Review as well because it was a bit overwhelming as it is so having the one question the class could work on together was very helpful.”

^{xiii} I ran 1 tailed, two sample equal variance t-tests on five evaluation questions comparing the first and second year evaluations (spring 2012 and spring 2013) to the last two years of evaluations (fall 2018 and fall 2019). Students are given a likert scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree) to rank the course on the following: 1) Valuable learning experience; 2) Instructor was an effecting communicator; 3) Teaching methods effectively conveyed content; 4) Assignments/readings helped me learn; 5) Instructor stimulated my interest. For responses 1, 2, 3, 5, there is a statistically significant difference between the student responses from spring 2012 and fall 2019; for responses 1, 2, 5, there is a statistically significant difference between the student responses from spring 2013 and fall 2019; for responses 2, 3, 5, there is a statistically significant difference between the student responses from spring 2012 and fall 2018. Finally, there is no statistically significant difference in responses for any of the five questions between fall 2018 and fall 2019 (for either a 1 or 2 tailed, two sample equal variance t-test).