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Vegetables, Not Dessert: Teaching Sociological Research Principles in an Evaluation Course

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Abstract The author recounts her journey from graduate school researcher to full time evaluator to criminal justice professor teaching research and evaluation. With some humor, she describes the disconnect between her enjoyment of research and evaluation and her students' disdain for the same disciplines, eventually arriving at a happy medium whereby she has learned how to teach criminal justice graduate students some basic evaluation concepts.

Keywords Evaluation · Research · Graduate

I am a recovering sociologist. I am a sociologist who is employed as a faculty member in a criminal justice department of a four year university. While my graduate school concentration was in law, crime, and deviance, I also explored the breadth of sociological inquiry with courses in theory, social psychology, organizational sociology, and of course, research methods and statistics. Once a sociologist, always a sociologist. And unlike other character depictions that are associated with the word "recovering," I see no reason to abandon the sociologist part of me. Sociological scientific inquiry continues to inform my work and influence my perceptions of everyday life after over 20 years, and I expect it will remain a large part of who I am as an academic.

I am also a recovering evaluator. I was trained in a Research I university doctoral program, where I developed my love of research. Until my second semester in graduate school, I had not considered research as a possible career option. I have wanted to teach since I can remember, except for brief aspirations to star in Broadway musicals or sing with a rock band. I went to graduate school so that I would be able to teach. I became a teaching assistant in hopes of learning the ropes. But then I heard about some fascinating research that one of the faculty members at my graduate school was doing, and I wanted in. I started working for her, and fell in love with crosstabs, regression, and SPSS.

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While I was working on the early stages of my dissertation, I began to realize that a graduate assistant's salary was probably not going to be sufficient to supplement my husband's income, now that we had a house and a first child, and plans to continue to procreate at least a couple more times. At that point I found a classified advertisement in the Sunday newspaper, just as my advisor also pointed me toward the same job. Our local county probation department was looking for a research analyst (i.e., evaluator), and except for the fact that I had not yet completed my graduate work, I appeared to be qualified. This was the first step toward 13 years of working with the probation department and the court as an evaluator, and I enjoyed it thoroughly. Many of the programs I evaluated were related to therapeutic court models – community court, mental health court, multiple DWI court – and I felt like the research tools with which I left graduate school were being put to good use. I was not just crunching numbers; I was crunching numbers so that they meant something, so that the justice system could potentially be improved, so that research did not exist in a vacuum. It was rewarding work.

I was even able to turn an evaluation project into my doctoral dissertation, and thus complete my Ph.D. while working full-time. After the probation department received a grant which enabled domestic assault probation officers to reduce their caseloads significantly, they asked me to analyze the data to see if reduced caseloads and more intensive supervision were impacting recidivism for chronic domestic assault offenders. I expanded this study into an exploration of the time it takes for domestic assault probationers to desist from abusing their intimate partners, as well as what individual and organization level factors predict such desistance. I not only earned my Ph.D., but also provided the court and probation department with useful findings, particularly about working with probationers to help them find jobs, as gainful employment emerged as the strongest predictor of desistance (Eckberg 2001).

However, my interest in teaching remained. The spark within me may have dimmed, but it needed only a bit of oxygen to grow the flame, which happened when I applied for a full-time faculty position in a criminal justice program. I arrived on campus full of enthusiasm to share with students what I knew about research. I jumped at the chance to teach research methods to undergraduates, only to find out that virtually none of the students shared my enthusiasm for hypotheses, variables, survey data and content analysis. I stressed the importance of being critical consumers of information, asking them how they know that what they read in the newspaper is true and unbiased. I was met with blank stares. They did not read the newspaper, let alone think about the validity of the printed word. I stressed that information reaches them in a variety of ways – through social media websites and blips of news between songs on the radio. I was horrified to find out how woefully unaware my students were. They didn't know what they didn't know, and frankly, they didn't care about anything except how many points the final exam was worth, and whether or not I offered extra credit. This course was just one hurdle in the way of their diploma, a box they needed to check to graduate. It was the vegetable on the metaphorical dinner plate of their college education, whereas other courses much more closely resembled dessert. Thinking about how to ask questions effectively and seek answers did not seem nearly as interesting as the war stories told by other faculty members who taught part time but worked during the day as street cops. Quantitative analysis paled by comparison to tales of difficult arrests and use of non-lethal weapons.

But I held my breath and waited for what was coming: our department had just received approval to begin a graduate program, to confer the degree of Master of Science in Criminal Justice upon deserving students who survived 2 years of rigorous coursework. The program was designed for professionals working in the criminal justice system; we only accept applicants who have worked in the field for a couple of years. This focus on applied graduate studies was unique, and as we developed the core courses, the faculty considered what specific skills working professionals would need to enhance their career mobility. As we developed the graduate curriculum further, we all agreed that a class in program evaluation was necessary for our soon-to-be-graduate-educated criminal justice practitioners. And, with 13 years of experience doing this kind of work, I was the logical choice to teach the course.

Again, I approached this course with enthusiasm and energy, anxious to solve all the unanswered questions the students surely had about program evaluation, having been exposed to some form of evaluation in their agencies. Surprisingly, I soon realized that students were not only unaware of program evaluation, but worse yet, they were dismayed to find out that the evil faculty was trying to sneak in research concepts under the cloak of something that sounded more applied. While there was no evil intent on the part of research-obsessed faculty such as myself, the students were not that far off. We had an obligation to teach them research, and there was no way to understand program evaluation without understanding basic research methods first. For a number of reasons beyond the scope of this article, we did not at the time offer a graduate research methods course. Yet I assumed, during the first semester teaching program evaluation, that graduate students came in with some foundation in research methods. "Give me a research question," I commanded. No response. "Ok. What about a hypothesis?" Again, not a word. I had thought this would be so much easier with graduate students. My work was cut out for me.

Back to my sociological training I went. What is research? Why is research important? Ask a question, find an answer. Use data. Become comfortable with words like empirical, valid, and reliable. Support ideas with evidence. Common sense, right? My myopic approach, from my years of training, did not allow me to see any other way to satisfy inquisitive minds. Research was necessary not only to graduate school studies, but to life itself. Aren't you curious? Remember all those theories you learned in your soon-to-be-second-least-favorite-course? How do you suppose they became so popular? They had to be tested with data, replicated over time, proven to actually describe human behavior.

My students were criminal justice professionals, and like so many in the field who are not required to pay attention to empirical inquiry, they were slaves to anecdotal evidence. "The study might say this, but I know from that one client I had last week that this is the way it is." I struggled to get them to understand the difference between individual and aggregate level data, and why it is important.

Back to my evaluator training I went. Let's focus on money. I asked the students whether they thought it was possible that they or their agency might need to apply for a grant one day. I asked them how they would fund the next "great idea" that they, their colleagues, or their supervisors might develop to solve a pressing concern. The students began to show some acknowledgement of the points I was raising. They had indeed had experience with grants, in one way or another. While most of them had not realized that grants often require an evaluation component, they seemed to understand why it made

sense. I reduced initial evaluation concepts to the most basic level – would you continue to pay for something that was meant to solve a problem without any evidence that said problem was being solved or, at the very least, improved? They seemed to recognize the significance of demonstrating value to funders.

The challenge, however, was to bring research methods into the discussion, so that they understood the foundations of evaluation. I presented many examples of actual evaluations (some I had conducted myself, some from academic journals), and although the students seemed to agree that such intellectual exploration was important, they got stuck on the methodological concepts. I began to enforce research methods work, by working with them to actually gather and analyze simple data, and apply analysis results in order to determine how to improve the justice system. We worked on group projects. The group projects during the first semester that I taught the class did not go according to plan, mostly because of lack of follow through on the part of the organizations with which I attempted to partner. However, the second time I taught the course, the group project was much more meaningful and successful.

The project for this second group of Master's students was to evaluate a local struggling non-profit organization's adherence to their mission statement. The organization was a court monitoring organization whose mission was, in part, to increase the public's knowledge of the court system. I collaborated with a colleague who was teaching an undergraduate course on diversity issues. She required her undergraduates to go to court and collect data. My graduate students created a pre-test and a post-test to give the undergraduates, as well as the court monitoring form, in order to determine whether court monitoring improved their level of knowledge about court processes and interest in civic engagement.

The graduate students at first thought the task of creating the instruments would be simple, and eventually realized the depth and detail that must be considered when creating survey questions. It was is if I could see the light bulbs over their heads illuminate. "So this was why she was forcing us to learn about Likert scales." "Maybe this was what she meant when she warned us of the dangers of double barreled questions." "Why not just ask open ended questions?" They started to understand the value of pre-determined answers and closed ended questions, especially when it came time to analyze the data. Finally, the research methods I so loved from my training as a sociologist was being put to use. My students seemed to be getting it.

Eventually, my graduate students took on a full-scale evaluation of this non-profit court monitoring organization, both to evaluate the relationship of court monitoring efforts to their mission statement, but also to recommend changes to the organization's current practices with an eye toward survival into the future. Much class time was devoted to brain storming and group analysis of data. Students were assigned to different pieces of the project – situation analysis, needs assessment, literature review, quantitative and qualitative analysis, and formulation of recommendations – which they would present to the rest of the class for help with fine tuning.

The project culminated with an unprecedented meeting between the organization's board members and my graduate students, where the graduate students presented their findings and engaged in a lively and energetic discussion designed to help the organization move forward. The students explained methodology like professionals, just enough so that the board members understood that the evaluation was done carefully and thoughtfully, but not so much that they lost interest in the findings. The students

saw actual evidence of the value of engaging with stakeholders in an interactive dialogue. The board members asked specific questions about how the students arrived at their recommendations for the organization, and the students responded with an intelligent discussion of both evaluation logic and deductive inquiry.

Much like a mother whose picky toddlers eat the vegetables hidden in a casserole, I felt I had succeeded in teaching my graduate students sociological research principles without them realizing it. The task was far more difficult than I had imagined, but also quite rewarding. I continue to teach the program evaluation course and continually seek to incorporate sociology and research while striving to make learning about evaluation somewhat enjoyable. While the students may not share my enthusiasm for evaluation, they are at least coming away with a rudimentary understanding of its importance, and for now I am satisfied with this. My training as both sociologist and evaluator are being put to good use.

Reference

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