Appendix 3

TEACHING AND LEARNING TIPS

Chapter 1

- Introducing students to the concept of empiricism is central to this chapter. Do something to grab the class’ attention in order to demonstrate that empiricism is the process by which information is gathered through the senses. I have often requested that a student hand me his or her textbook (for those that have managed to procure one by the first day of class). I then proceed to drop the book on the tile floor so that it makes a deafening sound. I then ask: “what happened?” Most of the class responds in unison “you dropped the book.” To which I reply: “how do you know I dropped the book?” To which they reply: “I saw it.” This is where I say: “the essence of empiricism, and therefore social scientific research methods, is observation through the senses.” Stress that empiricism is observation through our senses.

- After defining empiricism, then you can introduce the six empirical tools. As is presented in the text, start with surveys and then move to in-depth interviews. The differences and juxtaposition of these two methods work well. Then, you can move to focus group, as the discussion of focus group works well following a discussion of in-depth interviews. The remaining methods can be presented as the instructor sees fit. I would leave existing data for last, as this empirical tool in not an original data collection method.

- Differential between the three deductive and the three inductive tools – in other words, stress to the students which are deductive and which are inductive. Begin to discuss the interconnected nature of deductive and inductive research.

Chapter 2

- In terms of topic generation, stress the importance of topics that are not overly complex. Stress “researchable” topics that students could reasonably develop into an actionable research design. Topics that are smaller in scope tend to be better suited for novice research methods students.

- In forming a deductive research question, stress to students that without an identifiable relationship, you cannot be sure if your research question is actionable – in other words, whether it can be used as the basis for developing a deductive method.
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- Provide an example of how one might transition from broad topic to a narrow deductive research question with an identifiable relationship. Use the figure below to aid in developing an example (see Figure 1).
- Underscore that a hypothesis is: a brief declarative statement that (1) specifies a relationship between two variables which are part of the RQ, and (2) it specifies the direction of the relationship between two variables and the strength of the relationship.
- Explain why a literature review is important. Not only is it important for students to understand what constitutes a literature review and how one completes it, but also the value in terms of figuring out methodological problems needs to be underscored. All too often, students see the literature review as busy work. They have never been faced with a methodological conundrum, and thus do not see the inherent value in the literature review. Stress that all of the answers are in the literature. If a student cannot identify enough extraneous variables, the answer is in the literature. If a student does not see how to measure a particular variable, the answer is in the literature. If a student is having sampling problems, the answer is in the literature.
- Show students in the classroom how to navigate the electronic databases via the college or university website. Use a hypothetical example and conduct a keyword search. Chances are a small percentage of your students might not know how to do this properly.

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- Use several examples when teaching student how to identify the unit of analysis – at least two where the UoA is the individual, two where the UoA is a collection of individuals, and two where the UoA is a geographic location of some sort.

Figure 1. Generating a deductive research question
A mistake often made by students is failing to understand that extraneous variables are independent variables that are going to be controlled for. When discussing the three types of variables, use the diagrammatic approach in Figure 2.

Chapter 4

An important aspect to underscore in this chapter is the proper pairing of empirical tool and unit of analysis. For example, a common mistake is to identify existing data as the primary method of measurement when the unit of analysis is an individual level unit. As we know, existing data is, by and large, collected to represent collective UoAs. Obviously, there are exceptions to all rules. A good rule of thumb to stress is that individual level UoAs are typically paired with surveys or experimentation / survey, and collective UoAs are typically paired with existing data.

Chapter 5

Stress to students that writing survey questions is a trial and error process. It is not a process whereby an entire survey instrument can be written over the course of a weekend. There is no good survey writing, only good survey re-writing.

Stress the importance of trying to find existing questions within the literature. For example, a student with a research question that has depression as one of its variables should not be attempting
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to write his or her own questions when there are reputable diagnostic survey questions that have been developed (and refined), used, and re-used by researchers and mental health clinicians for years (if not generations).

• Stress that the method of delivery needs to match the question design. In other words, if the survey is intended to be delivered by telephone, then it has to be written for the telephone.

Chapter 6

• Stress that the classical experimental design is superior because there are fewer internal validity concerns (or these internal validity concerns can be better managed or accounted for).

• Discuss the importance of the quasi-experiments. Even though these experiments are imperfect, they are often used as the basis for making policy and program evaluation decisions.
  ◦ Non-Equivalent Two Group: ideal for studies where you have intact groups.
  ◦ Pre-test / Post-test One Group: frequently used for program evaluations – more specifically program impact assessments.
  ◦ Interrupted Time Series: an often used technique for determining the outcome of a specific public policy.
  ◦ Natural Experiment: some event beyond the control of the researcher occurs, which provides an opportunity for the research to examine the impact of an event.

Chapter 7

• A common mistake that students make regarding existing data is thinking that the findings contained within a journal article are existing data. It is important to underscore that a journal article’s findings are not existing data. Rather, they are someone else’s analysis of either original data or existing data.

Chapter 8

• Stress to students that stakeholders are central to the evaluation process. Identifying the right stakeholders – as well as a diverse number of stakeholders – is important because they are the best sources of information as to how well or poorly a program is performing.

• The importance of logic model cannot be understated. Have students choose a program or design a program of their own and identify the elements of a logic model. You cannot evaluate a program unless you understand all of its parts, and having students sketch out a complete logic model reinforces such an understanding.

Chapter 9

• Stress the difference between a program evaluation and a policy analysis. All too often, students find these terms to be confusing because they sound as if they could be interchangeable. A program evaluation precedes a policy analysis. In simplest terms, a program evaluation is designed to see if a program is working. A policy analysis is designed to choose an alternative policy because the existing program or policy is not working as expected.
Chapter 10

- While this book teaches methods from a deductive perspective, it is important for students to have an understanding of how the inductive empirical tools work – not merely what they and what they do – but how to go about executing these tools. Stress the fundamentals of how to conduct a productive focus group session, or how to put together a sound interview protocol. These qualitative skills not only dovetail with the deductive methods, but they serve as vital tools for applied research, especially program evaluations.

Chapter 11

- Perform a random sample in class. This reinforces a very important point when it comes to sampling – once you have the sampling frame, completing the actual random sample is fairly easy. The one aspect of sampling that needs to be underscored is the process by which the sampling frame is either found or put together. By found, I mean this: if your UoA is states of the U.S., then you would simply conduct an internet search, find a source where the states are listed, and then copy and paste that list into excel. By put together, I mean this: if your UoA is high schools in the U.S., then you would (assuming that a full list does not exist) complete an internet search for each state and compile 50 lists of high school that would be combined into one master list. The random sample would be drawn from this master list.

Chapter 12

- Create a fictional dataset with an IV, DV, and three EVs. Use an example that is accessible to students like the one presented in Chapter 12. Use this fictional data set to discuss the elements of data coding, data cleaning, and finally data analysis. Go step-by-step using a statistical program like SPSS or Stata to conduct univariate, bivariate, and multiple regression analysis. By doing this, you give students a sense of what to do. It is a similar approach to apprentice training. Following this, you present students with another fictional dataset and have them conduct statistical analyses.

Chapter 13

- Stress the importance of informed consent. The protection human subjects is of utmost importance for social scientists, especially the notion of voluntary participation. Discuss with your students that while it is ethical to try to persuade people to participate, even going as far as offering monetary benefits, it is not acceptable to use coercion.