

SO492 as a Case Study for Large Workshop Teaching in Sociology

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SO492 is a core or semi-core course on the MSc Culture & Society, MSc Economy & Society and MSc Sociology. For the last five-plus years, it has been capped at 78 students and taught as a 1 hour lecture plus 3 x 90 minute seminars. It has regularly over recruited. The teaching has been shared between 2-3 faculty members who give the lecture and seminars for the weeks that they are assigned to. All teaching has occurred on one day of the week.

With support from a Catalyst Award from the Eden Centre, in 2025-26 we trialed teaching SO492 instead as a 3 hour 'Harvard style' large group workshop capped at 80 students. One faculty member (Carrie Friese) taught the entire course with the support of a GTA (Amani Bhobe). This report summarises our experience in teaching qualitative methods using this format. We begin with the bench marking exercise that Amani conducted in the summer of 2025 to support the course redesign. We then summarise the changes we made to SO492 teaching, review student evaluations on the course and consider future modifications.

How Have Qualitative Methods Been Taught?

Benchmarking Current Approaches

We review here how qualitative methods are normally taught and what are considered best practices in Sociology specifically and qualitative methods training generally.

Teaching Qualitative Research Methods

The main way in which qualitative research methods are taught is through experiential learning. Experiential learning refers to a learning approach where students gain knowledge and skills through direct experience and hands-on practice, rather than just through lectures, textbooks, or purely theoretical instruction.

The primary principle underpinning experiential learning is the idea of *learning by doing*: students do not just read about research but they actually conduct research projects and research activities. At its core, experiential learning operates on the idea that learning and understanding best emerges through active practice—rather than simply consuming research literature, students immerse themselves in conducting actual research investigations. Supporting this pedagogical approach is substantial evidence demonstrating how reflective practice enhances learning outcomes. Through reflection, students process their experiences, establish meaningful connections between practical work and theoretical concepts, and critically assess which strategies proved successful or problematic.

Research has also demonstrated the effectiveness of bolstering the experience of teaching qualitative research methods (in various disciplines, not just sociology) using practical materials and/or class simulations. The materials included visual sources like videos (Barrett, 2007), visual texts (photographs and drawings) (Davidson et al., 2009), reflective journals (Hein, 2004; Reisetter, Yexley, Bonds, Nickels, & McHenry, 2003; Roulston et al., 2003), web-based instructional modules or learning objects (Raddon, Raby, & Sharpe, 2009), among other materials.

Team-based learning (TBL), in particular, has also been shown to be an effective strategy when teaching sociology: Huggins and Stamatel (2015) founds students in TBL sections reported greater improvements in verbal expression and creative thinking skills compared to their lecture-based counterparts, likely due to the frequent team activities and problem-solving tasks inherent in the method. Additionally, TBL fostered stronger interpersonal connections between students, with students reporting that they got to know both their professors and classmates significantly better than lecture students did.

Wagner, Kawulich and Garner (2019) conducted a review of the literature from 1999 to 2013 on teaching qualitative research methods. Presented in this paper are the benefits of using “learning by doing” experiential methods to teach qualitative research. I summarize these here: The research viewed by the authors overwhelmingly found that when students were trained using these methods (versus only theory-based instruction), they were able to use their own personal experiences and feelings in their research work, and started to see themselves as real researchers. The literature found teachers reported students felt more confident that they could actually complete a research project on their own. This teaching style was also credited with helping students begin to understand the real problems that researchers face when doing their work. They could see the tough

choices researchers have to make along the way. Through these teaching methods, students also discovered their strengths and weakness in conducting research—through activities, they could see where they needed to improve their understanding of research ideas and their writing abilities.

Learning by doing is also shown to help students get more involved with what they were learning and apply it better in practice, through the activities planned in classes. This method of teaching and its benefits in this way thus also made it easier for teachers to see how well students were doing. Finally, students learned about their own role as researchers. They understood how their own knowledge, life experiences, and background affect their research. They learned how to think about their own viewpoints while also trying to understand the views of the people they were studying.

In teaching qualitative research, providing experiential and practice-based learning opportunities to students was seen by teachers in not only sociology, but also social work, geography, psychology and social policy, as being of the utmost importance, and as the preferred approach to teaching qualitative research (over simply delivering lectures about qualitative research). Some authors have even insisted that *only* the experiential approach be used to teach qualitative research methods:

“Even within the limitations of relatively short academic terms, qualitative courses must also introduce students to the processes of conducting research by directly engaging students in generating, analyzing, and interpreting data in order to gain skills, competence, and most of all, the necessary feel of doing qualitative work” (Barrett 2007, p. 419 in Wagner et al. 2019)

However, despite this being the predominant approach to teaching qualitative research methods, there are also challenges associated with this approach. For instance, research found that instructors often required significant time investment in designing and executing these activities, that assessment deadlines for more elaborate projects like these have tended to create more pressure for students; that activities do not stop adequate theoretical foundation from becoming essential before practical application, and that despite their benefits in helping students get practical experience in doing qualitative research, classroom activities conducted in controlled environments often lacked the authenticity found in real research environments, meaning students may nevertheless encounter challenges they cannot practice for in the classroom.

Classrooms and Space

How do universities structure their qualitative research methods classes? Instructors have taught SO492 using two distinct approaches, and each offers specific benefits and drawbacks. We discuss both formats here.

The first is a lecture-seminar format. Here, the teaching experience is split into two separate types of classes. In this approach, students attend lectures where the teacher stands at the front and delivers a lecture about some aspect of qualitative research. These lectures are usually for larger groups of students (that is, the entire class is present) and the teacher does most of the talking. After the lecture has been delivered, students then must attend seminar classes, which are conducted in smaller groups rather than with the entire class together. In seminars, there are fewer students, and everyone sits together to discuss what they learned in the lectures. There are guided activities in these seminars.

The second way is to combine everything into workshop-style classes. In workshops, the lecture and seminar parts of a learning experience happen at the same time in the same room. Workshops are usually very hands-on, meaning students learn by doing rather than just listening. This approach is sometimes called "Harvard-style" because of where this style of teaching was popularized.

There is much in common with both these formats: for instance, they are both active rather than passive teaching formats, with a heavy element of discussion. Discussion has been shown to produce higher levels comprehension rather than lecture-only teaching, which is a passive format of teaching, which has been linked with an increased ability to recall facts but lower levels of comprehension (Caprariis, Barman, & Magee 2001).

Moreover, both methods combine the lecture and seminar—this combination has been also shown to produce positive teaching outcomes in teaching research. The combination of a lecture and seminar has been linked with positive learning outcomes as compared to traditional lecture-based method alone (see Hunt, Haidet, Coverdale, and Richards, 2003). Another study which directly compares lecture combined with discussion versus “active, cooperative learning methods” conducted by Morgan, Whorton, & Gunsalus (2000) similarly found that the use of the lecture combined with discussion resulted in a “superior retention of material among students.”

Thus, the primary difference is the size of the class, and the time spent learning and instructing in one session. Based on these differences, we consider the benefits and downsides below.

While we discuss both formats here, it is worth noting that researchers have published little about Harvard-style classes for sociology, and even less about these classes for teaching qualitative research methods specifically. To support this exercise, we therefore read the broader teaching literature to identify the benefits and downsides of each approach.

Benefits and Possible Downsides of the Lecture-Seminar Format

Benefits of the lecture-seminar format include: clear structure that separates information delivery from discussion, efficient delivery of content to large numbers of students at once, time for students to process lecture material before discussing it in seminars, and consistency in the core content all students receive. The smaller seminar groups allow for personalized attention and deeper discussion that is not usually possible in large lectures.

However, downsides of this format include: potential disconnect between what is taught in lectures and what is discussed in seminars, passive learning during lectures where students may disengage, scheduling challenges of coordinating multiple class types, and the possibility that shy students may not participate even in smaller seminars.

Benefits and Possible Downsides of Harvard-Style Workshops

There are several benefits of longer, intensive sessions. These include: enhanced learning through sustained engagement, improved retention through concentrated exposure, and greater opportunity for complex skill development within single sessions.

However, concerns accompanying these extended classes include: difficulty maintaining student attention over prolonged periods, potential for increased noise levels in active learning environments, challenges in tracking individual student progress during intensive sessions, and the risk of cognitive overload. These spatial and temporal considerations significantly impact the learning environment's effectiveness.

Benchmarking UK Sociology Departments - Qualitative Research Methods Teaching

Limited information exists about how UK universities currently teach research methods courses, but I have compiled available data in the table below based on current websites and online materials. The focus of the search was in Sociology departments. Notably, many UK universities do not offer dedicated qualitative research courses—SO492 stands out as unique both in its content and teaching approach.

University	Teaching Style	Other info
Bristol	Mixture of in-person lectures and seminars and online interactive structured learning activities	Two methods classes offered: Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods in the Social Sciences Advanced Qualitative Research These are offered as options on their sociology masters degrees.
Oxford	Website descriptions suggest lecture-only format (not explicitly stated)	Qualitative research training is part of the MSc Sociology
Cambridge	According to their website, as part of the MPhil Cambridge offers twelve hours of optional seminars for learning research methods. These are delivered as both lectures and seminars	Students are taught methods as part of the MPhil in Sociology
Edinburgh	Research training is offered as an option	Qualitative research taught as part of MSc in Sociology and Global Change
Leeds	Various teaching methods, including lectures, seminars and workshops	Sociology courses are a part of the school of sociology and social policy. There is no sociological research methods course, but the details I provide here as from their general qualitative research course offered at the school
Sheffield	Teaching is conducted through a combination of lectures, workshops, seminars, and small-group work	Sociology courses are a part of the school of sociological Studies, Politics and International Relations. As with Leeds, there is no distinct sociological qualitative research methods course
UCL	Combines lectures, seminars, practical sessions, tutorials, and research supervision; field researchers teach courses; seminars allow discussion and	Part of the Sociology Msc

	application; methods courses pair lectures with computer lab workshops	
Kings	No details on teaching style online.	There is no MSc in Sociology, but it appears qualitative research methods are taught as part of courses in the school of Social Science & Public Policy .
Cardiff	The website says teaching is delivered through a mix of lectures and “activities”	Research methods are taught as part of the MSc in Sociology. Choosing one methods course (either qualitative or quantitative) is a mandatory requirement for Masters students.
Exeter	Delivered through a mixture of lecture, seminars and workshops	Research methods are taught as part of the MA in Sociology. This is a combination of qualitative, quantitative and what they call digital methods. This also includes computational social science methods. FYI – the course code is SOCM019 if of interest
Essex	Delivered via one 2 hour seminar per week.	Methods taught as part of the MA in Sociology. Sociological research design is a core module.

The data clearly shows that UK universities predominantly use variants of the lecture-seminar format for MSc classes.

SO492 Teaching Modifications

In order to support the shift from a lecture-seminar format to a large group workshop, several changes were made that includes:

1. the creation of a Research Diary that provided students with a means to keep track of their work across the term. Activities in the Research Diary were incorporated into the workshop to guide students in the research process;
2. the inclusion of a GTA in the workshops to support teaching a large group and to also hold office hours;
3. the incorporation of learning technologies into teaching (e.g., Mentimeter);
4. the incorporation of pre-recorded student presentations into the workshop where the small groups had dedicated and private workspace allocated on Moodle;

5. the inclusion of case studies into the teaching.

As part of the Catalyst Award, we also created a new session addressing the opportunities and challenges as well as debates around AI and qualitative research methods.

Benefits, Limitations and Future Directions

Teaching in a single, three hour workshop had several benefits but also challenges. We review these here from our perspective as the teachers as well as offer suggestions regarding future directions -- as the course will be taught again in 2026-2027 as a 3 hour workshop.

The benefits included:

1. there could be more fluid movement between lecture components, discussion and activities;
2. all students benefitted from learning from one another as the pool of students who spoke in class was larger than in smaller seminars;
3. the inclusion of a GTA in teaching methods was very helpful as the voice of a more relatable researcher was articulated and this allowed for more office hours to be available; and
4. new formats for learning could be included (e.g., debates, case studies, doing research activities in the workshop itself, small group work).

Some of the challenges that we experienced included:

1. the students did not want to use the microphones and so students at one end of the room could not necessarily hear students at the other end of the room;
2. small group activities within the workshop were a challenge because of the noise level and this meant that there was less opportunity to ensure quieter students had an opportunity to speak;
3. students did not use the student forum on Moodle;
4. lecture capture of lecture material was lost; and
5. technical difficulties meant there was lost time.

We did notice a marked decline in attendance as the term went on.

We detail possible changes that could be made for the future below.

1. Students were assigned to a small group to give a pre-recorded presentation for one week. These small groups could instead be a feature of the course as a whole. Students could be

assigned to a small group and all small groups do the activity in question for that week outside of the classroom. Only some small groups present this to the workshop, however. We could assign the small groups based on MSc, keeping the students on the different MSc programmes together in their small group work. This could reduce the amount of small group work done in the workshop and the problem of noise levels.

2. The presentations could be given in person to address technical challenges. Inclusion plans will need to be attended to, however, and alternatives made available.
3. Class participation could be a small percentage of the mark on the course, with the GTA responsible for noting participation in seminar discussion. To address inclusion, the class forum on Moodle would be an option that the GTA would also monitor. (This was available but not used in 2025-26).

Student Evaluations

There was a 57% response rate to the student survey evaluating the course, with 46 students completing it. The average course rating was 4.3% and the average teacher rating 4.6%. Students reported the positive elements of the course were its clarity, its rigorousness, the practice-based elements and its interactive elements. In this sense, the practice-based component of qualitative methods teaching did not necessarily seem to be lost through the change in format. Students found the Research Diary useful and this is a beneficial improvement to the course. The Research Diary could be further developed if small group work is expanded as well. Indeed, one recommendation from a student was to create 'homework' assignments that would allow for the small group activities to be done with more depth. This could be addressed through Recommendation 1 above.

In terms of how the course could be improved, students consistently noted that small group work in such a large group setting is not possible due to noise levels. The class size was also critiqued for reducing an ability to participate and it made discussing more sensitive topics like ethics challenging. Some students did not like moving between lecture, discussion and activities. And the length of a three-hour seminar was challenging for some students, with one 15 minute break not being sufficient. While many student commended the interactive elements of the course, there was also the desire for more interaction. A significant number of students requested it be returned to the older format of lecture plus 3 x 90 minute seminars.

The new module on AI and Qualitative Methods

We introduced a new session on AI in qualitative methods. This session took a case study approach, first allowing students to respond to a more 'popular' case of AI before taking on a specific vision regarding the implications of AI for sociological research generally and qualitative research specifically.

We note that the students who don't use AI were the most vocal in this session. A student emailed me afterwards to tell me that they did not want to say this to the entire department, but that they found the session incredibly helpful in rethinking their own use of AI in life in general.

We had not anticipated either the classroom or out of classroom response.

To improve this session going forward, we think it should come after the week on coding. The session should include an exercise where AI is used in a coding exercise. This will help to demonstrate the benefits but also the limitations for students in using AI to code their data.

Carrie notes that there were a number of suspected cases of inappropriately using of AI in the assessed Research Reports on the course. This will need to be evaluated in the future and compared to other courses. Including class participation in the final mark could help address this.

Final Recommendation for the Assessment

MSc conveners and course lecturers should be consulted on making a change to the assessment, removing Discourse Analysis as an option for data collection and data analysis and limiting the choice to Interviews or Participant Observation. (There are grounds to consider requiring students do both as well.) Very few students are doing Discourse Analysis in a manner that aligns with either Critical Discourse Analysis or British Cultural Studies as they are instead looking at things like memes, reddit, etc. This type of data and analysis could instead be addressed in the new Sociology and AI course.

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