

Teaching and Learning Centre Case Studies

Researching London

Samuel Johnson, the essayist and lexicographer, famously said that being tired of London was like being tired of life because “there is in London all that life can afford”. This is perhaps a huge overstatement, particularly viewed now in the days of 24/7, wall-to-wall, online entertainment; however almost 250 years after Johnson’s death, London still has much to teach us. Luckily students in the Department of Sociology at the LSE are still learning from this vibrant city. *Researching London: Methods for Social Research (SO211)* is a compulsory course for 2nd year students studying for the BSc in Sociology and takes a very ‘social’ approach to learning about social research. The focus of the course is on providing students with a hands-on understanding of research methodology through engaging with practical research on life in London. The course is co-convened this year by Dr Sam Friedman and Dr Ioanna Gouseti, and Ioanna is convinced that adopting an experiential approach to learning about research offers students a learning experience that is relevant, rigorous and relatable and that leads to a “*methodological literacy that is comparable to many MSc students’ abilities.*”



The course involves undergraduate students designing their own research strategies and testing them out through running real-world research on an aspect of London of their own choosing. This includes a range of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, such as observations, interviews, surveys. Through this, the students get a sense of the urban sociology of London and develop an understanding of research as a human endeavour. After developing their research tools and completing their qualitative methodology training and

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initial fieldwork in Michaelmas Term, the students work as groups, using quantitative methodologies, and present their findings during a class conference in Lent Term. They also draw on these experiences to develop a final research proposal that very often feeds into their final year dissertations. Through designing and running their own projects the students are able to enhance their skills in self-management, communication, presentation and the application of a range of qualitative and quantitative research techniques. By any measure, the breadth of the course means that this is very rigorous undertaking; however the DIY approach to learning social research also means that students are able to develop a deeper personal connection with their learning experience.

This course offers real value and enjoyment while the range of topics and the different approaches that students take means that there is no end to the possibilities of researching London (other than ethical considerations); as many topics can be explored through many different approaches and through many different perspectives. But it is not just the nature of the projects that supports student learning, simply by giving students permission to be autonomous learners and personalise their own learning experience, the course offers students something that they can carry forward with them. Something that will inform their future research undertakings and the way that they conceptualise research. So it is not just the experience that they will remember, they will also be taking away insight and understanding and, as Ioanna says, *“It doesn’t have to be big, it can be a small project, but having something like this might be one of the things that the student will remember for a long time.”*

Through this course, students are able to see a bigger picture, a larger snapshot of London. The observation of urban contexts (crowds, tourism, economics etc.) forms a key aspect of this course and through active enquiry, students are able to grow as individuals whilst developing their understanding of a living city. For example, one student was interested in researching gentrification in particular neighbourhoods and this topic led them to visit some London boroughs that they might not have otherwise visited. This example of learning beyond the classroom shows just one of the many benefits of the course.

But it is not just the students who have benefited from this course. Ioanna has also gathered new ideas that have helped inform her own research. Her research focuses on public reactions to crime, specifically the fear of crime, so she was fascinated when some of her students decided to develop a research project that focussed on the fear of being perceived as a criminal rather than victim (which is the common approach). Students bring excitement and new perspectives; they bring fresh minds and fresh questions, and this ‘freshness’ can help open up new avenues for research. In a busy city like London, studying the lived

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environment can offer the possibility of researching some rather thought-provoking aspects of life! These new perspectives and new avenues of enquiry are all built around a robust course that is underpinned by a practical understanding of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, involving grounded theory, research ethics, visual data and surveys.



While the more ‘traditional’ approach to teaching undergraduate students about research approaches has been classroom-based, offering a course that take the learning onto the streets can make a real impact on both the students and academic staff. The classroom offers a safe space where concepts can be examined in abstraction but this abstraction can reduce the connection between the learner and the things they are learning. This is especially the case with topics that are often considered to be ‘dry’ or ‘technical’, such as research methodology. When students find themselves researching the world beyond the campus things become more relevant and more connected and solving real-life problems can lead to a more meaningful learning experience. But social research can also be challenging and there is much that students can gain from meeting such challenges. Since this course is about working through research issues in the real world, when some students were struggling to focus their research questions, Ioanna made an effort not to over-help them but to stay in the background and let them work through their own problems. This approach allowed students to learn from trial and re-trial, and helped maintain their sense of autonomy and control.

Students studying *Researching London: Methods for Social Research* are unlikely to become tired of London but are more likely to become invigorated through researching within this particular ‘lab’. London is a diverse and exciting city, through studying on this course students get first-hand experience of designing and conducting research; they become familiar with concepts such as reliability, validity, generalisability, reflexivity and ethics, and the work that they produce supports their future research undertakings. For some students, this is a crucial step in deciding what their final year dissertation should be focused on. And

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for all the students this course offers the opportunity to develop their skills of enquiry, and perhaps even develop their understanding of themselves as Londoners, and people.

If you're interested using experiential learning on your course in similar ways, do get in touch with your [TLC departmental adviser](#). You may also want to apply for funding through [the Teaching and Learning Development Fund](#).