

Humanities Research Methods in a Liberal Arts & Sciences program

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ABSTRACT: The humanities research methods course at University College Utrecht is one of the graduation requirements for students who major in a humanities discipline, in law, or in politics. There are several challenges to the design of such a course in a Liberal Arts and Sciences (LA&S) context. In our paper, we review the literature on the teaching of research methods across the humanities and beyond. Secondly, we assess student experiences of the humanities research methods course at UCU, using surveys and interviews, to explore to what extent the course deals with aforementioned challenges, and to find out where improvement is possible. Our research suggests that the value of this course lies in helping student develop an interdisciplinary research identity rather than in directly preparing them for writing a BA-thesis within a specific discipline.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the life sciences and social sciences there is a strong tradition in teaching research methods, often in separate modules devoted to statistics or lab skills. Reflection on how to teach research methods is especially well-developed in the social sciences (Garner a.o. 2009, Wagner a.o. 2011). Such a tradition is much less prominent in the humanities, where research training is often considered to be an integral part of learning the discipline and not reflected upon explicitly (Griffin 2005). Griffin observes this has begun to change in her field (English literature) since the turn of the century, largely because of an increased demand on humanities researchers to include methodology sections in grant applications. This has put the issue of research methods training and more explicit reflection on research methodologies on the agenda, at least for the (post-)graduate level, which has resulted in a growing body of literature (Griffin 2005; Stausberg & Engler 2011; Strain & Potter 2012). In disciplinary journals, articles can be found on how best to teach research methods within disciplines such as history (Erekson 2011; Munro 2010) or English (Manista & Gillespie 2011; Mahoney & Brown 2013), but reflection on research training in a more interdisciplinary context is virtually non-existent.

However, the growing number of interdisciplinary bachelor programs has made the issue of research methods training across the humanities also salient on the undergraduate level. Whereas in monodisciplinary programs the teaching of research skills and methodologies is often integrated into core modules, in a Liberal Arts and Sciences (LA&S) context like University College Utrecht (UCU), students do not follow the same courses, and thus no common ground can be assumed. At UCU, all students take one mandatory course in their first year, which introduces them to basic research and writing skills such as referencing, searching literature, formulating a research question, and structuring essays. In addition to that, they have to complete a methodology requirement related to their field in a wide sense: a course in statistics or qualitative methods for the social sciences; lab modules and mathematics or biostatistics for the life sciences. For students majoring in humanities or in the text-based disciplines of law or politics (which at UCU are located in the social sciences) this required course is the ten-week module Humanities Lab: Representation, Discourse and Logic (hereafter referred to as the Humanities Lab), of which the first part introduces students to hermeneutics and acquaints them with tools to analyze various research objects (narrative, visual, and historical), and the second part gives an introduction to propositional logic. It would not be feasible to offer specific methodology courses for each discipline, if only because the groups would be much too small (f.e., in Spring 2017 there were just four students writing a thesis in literature).

The Humanities Lab caters to an academically very diverse group of students, which makes it difficult to determine which methodologies and analytical tools are most relevant or interesting to them.¹

¹ The eight humanities disciplines on offer at UCU are: art history, classics, history, linguistics, literature, media and performance studies, philosophy, and religious studies. Students majoring in humanities complete tracks in two disciplines, or one if they combine humanities and social sciences.

Combined with the lack of tradition in research training in the humanities and the need, nevertheless, to prepare students for doing research, the design of a humanities research methods course in an interdisciplinary context such as UCU poses challenges. The aim of this paper is to explore how students perceive the relevance and effectiveness of the Humanities Lab course as it is currently taught at UCU. Because we were especially interested in what students thought about the broad introduction to different analytical tools, our research project focuses on the first part of the course, in which students practice with analyzing narrative, visual, and historical sources. By reviewing the available literature on research training in the humanities, and combining this with the results of our surveys and interviews, we aim to develop a sustained vision on research training in the humanities in an interdisciplinary context.

2 METHODS

For the literature review, we searched for articles on humanities research methods education in a wide range of journals devoted to the scholarship of teaching and learning, research education and pedagogy of humanities disciplines. For the student evaluation, we used a mixed approach of surveys and interviews with students who took the course. While teacher expectations and opinions have their obvious relevance to any discussion and evaluation of the research methods course, these were not the topic of this paper. Surveys were held amongst two consecutive groups of second-years students right after they had completed the first part of the course, and third year students who had started working on their thesis. In addition to this, two in-depth interviews with third-year students were held. Questions focused on the content of the course, its place in the curriculum, and the type of learning students experienced, as well as how relevant and interesting students found the material, and if there was overlap with other courses. To the question of whether a research methods course in the humanities should be part of a LA&S curriculum in the first place, we return at the end of this paper.

3 REFLECTIONS

3.1 Literature review

There is little to no scholarship yet devoted to teaching research methods across the humanities, let alone in a Liberal Arts and Sciences context. So, while humanities scholars may increasingly have developed ‘a meta-discourse on how we do what we do and why’ in the past decade (Griffin 2005, 3), reflection on the consequences of this development for teaching research methods on the graduate and undergraduate level is still lacking. Existent research mostly addresses pedagogical aspects of teaching research methods, rather than the content or learning objectives of courses. As Earley (2014) shows, motivation for research methods courses is generally low because of their mandatory character, and there is a body of scholarly work on how best to engage students in the research training. Active student engagement in research training is most often reflected upon in the context of education of historical methods. Suggested effective strategies to increase student participation are engaging them in the whole process of ‘doing research’ (Erekson 2011) or the implementation of the research-teaching nexus: students get a better idea of what doing research entails when teachers bring in more of their own research into the classroom (Visser-Wijnveen a.o. 2012).

The teaching format is another important element of increasing student engagement: discussions between teacher and students rather than traditional lectures help increase student engagement. This trend is not unique to the humanities, but as Evans (1990) argues, it is especially important here because of the interpretative nature of humanities research: student discussions can bring out the various perspectives that different people might have when interpreting texts. Relating these insights to the situation at UCU we can observe that several of the conditions for student engagement are met in the Humanities Lab: the group-size is relatively small (20-25 students on average) so there is ample space for class discussion, and students do their own small historical research project. Although this is pre-structured in the sense that they receive a research question, the outcome is not: students have to search archival materials and interpret the results themselves. The research-teaching nexus is not structurally incorporated into the course, though examples are often drawn from the teacher’s own research.

As to the content of research methods teaching in the humanities, less literature is available. The learning objectives of research training discussed in the literature are often formulated rather broadly, in terms of critical thinking or developing writing skills, which gives little insight into the specific

analytical techniques that are being taught or valued. This suggests a strong connection between discipline-specific knowledge and related research skills. Several studies address how best to develop writing skills – whether in reflective essay writing (Power, 2016), support for PhD students (Fergie et al, 2011), or specific writing skills within the (humanities) disciplines (Parker, 2003), but these do not discuss analytical tools. One of the few articles that actually discuss an introductory methods course in the context of a multi-disciplinary American college argues for the separation of theatre students into their own, specialized research methods course (Fuller, 2014). In Fuller’s experience students learned to ‘dig [more] deeply’ by zooming in on their own discipline, and became more engaged in the subject matter as a result. Elsewhere, however, interdisciplinarity is lauded. A case study that combined research training in theatre studies and literature proved to be a success (Mahoney & Brown, 2013).

Examples of further-reaching interdisciplinarity can be found in Anderson (2011), who discusses how methods from social sciences can enrich the humanities. Burgett (2011), though not primarily concerned with research methods education in the humanities, stresses the importance of a research-based community of practice for interdisciplinary teaching. By making students think about the ways research questions are coupled to or uncoupled from research methods, the production of interdisciplinary knowledge is linked to research habits. A similar observation is made by White (2013), who laments the lack of attention for research design in methods education, and sees a misplaced focus on creating what he calls ‘methodological identities’: the tendency to place research methods before questions. His plea to devote more time to teaching research design and formulating questions is relevant to a LA&S context, where flexibility, and the awareness that a problem can be approached by different methods, are highly valued.

3.2 Surveys and interviews

We conducted surveys in Fall 2016 and Spring 2017 among two consecutive groups of students after they had taken the Humanities Lab, and among third-year students who had started work on their BA-thesis and had taken the course before. In addition, two in-depth interviews with thesis students were held. Response rates to the survey were about 30%, which amounts to 21 responses. The low number of collected data (survey responses and interviews) implies that we cannot draw any obvious conclusions based on quantitative data. The range of answers to some of the questions was very wide, but a few trends are visible, and the responses to open questions and the interviews provide material for analysis and some modest observations. Going beyond the anecdotal of just the teacher’s experience (Salvatori 2002), we regard our project as a first step of including students’ experiences in the reflection on the improvement of teaching humanities research methods.

Answers to the question what the Humanities Lab should *ideally* teach, and what students *actually* felt they learnt, largely point in the same direction. The vast majority answered that the course helped them to improve their analytical skills, and that the Humanities Lab should ideally teach how to analyze different types of sources, rather than formulate research questions, select a theoretical framework, or develop an academic argument. This indicates that the course content matches students’ expectations, even though their actual appreciation of the course may vary. The comments section demonstrates this variety: ‘Overall rather dull, felt like a waste of time’ sits next to ‘One of the best courses I had at UCU’. Contrasting comments like ‘I feel the course was incredibly useful for history and literature, it was the only time I’ve done discourse analysis at UCU’ and ‘The HumLab did not prepare for a thesis in philosophy at all’ make clear the course does not cater to all humanities disciplines equally. This is also reflected in the wide range of answers to the question if there is much overlap with other courses.

Despite the small numbers, one trend can be observed: students who just took the course as well as third years who had already started their thesis, evaluate the course on average as more *interesting* than *relevant*. This indicates students do not adopt a narrow disciplinary identity for which they want to learn the relevant methods, but demonstrate a broader interest. Several comments confirm this picture: ‘I feel the course offers something useful for most tracks ... UCU should pride itself on how multidisciplinary it is’, and ‘... these subjects help to elevate the writing skills of students across subjects.’ Another comment reads:

I think it is useful for other disciplines as well, since you learn to have a broader perspective on research in general. For example, I found the class that dealt with video analysis and photo analysis very interesting, and the analytic skills are useful in my academic development.

These comments demonstrate the students' ability to think beyond disciplinary borders. This is an important skill in the LA&S context, if only because a fair number of students have not yet decided in which discipline they will ultimately write their thesis by the time they take the Humanities Lab.

A difference between students who just took the course and thesis students is visible in how they evaluate the different teaching formats the course employs: where the first group indicates the (interactive) lectures as most important for their learning, with the weekly assignments coming second, the latter group points to the assignments and class discussions only, leaving out the lectures entirely. An explanation for this difference may be that a year after the taking the course, students remember the work they put into their own assignments better than what they learnt in lecture sessions. To the question whether students felt they were lacking research skills by the time they started their thesis, answers were, again, widely different. Where one answered 'I don't think I was', another would say s/he lacked research skills 'to a great extent'. One of the interviewees commented:

I felt unprepared for my thesis in Law, because I didn't take all the Law courses available at UCU [...]. I don't want to discuss this with my supervisor because I feel like (he feels like) I should have already learnt those things years ago. Now I just google when I don't know something.

This student did not blame her deficient skills on the methods course, apparently because she expects the disciplinary courses should teach those. Other students felt that research design is already covered in the introductory course and should not be dealt with in the Humanities Lab, and they do not expect a thorough preparation for thesis work: 'though interdisciplinary study has its merits, it is hard to go in-depth with research methodology for a certain major'. These comments indicate that students do not regard the Humanities Lab as a course that should prepare for thesis work, which is not surprising given the fact they will only start their thesis 6-12 months later. The responses do offer useful recommendations for increasing the relevance of the course itself:

[I]ncorporate some kind of larger research assignment where students are asked to incorporate both a research method from their own discipline and an approach from a discipline they are less familiar with. In this way, perhaps, there is more room for customization and pursuing interests/practical skills that feel relevant to the student while at the same time offering new perspectives and engaging with analytical skills.

And for relating research methods to the wider curriculum:

Teachers could be much more explicit about where certain methods are used: 'Historical analysis is used of course in history, but you can also recognize it in human geography, for example.' And not just the HumLab teachers: 'regular' course teachers could make their methodology more explicit and link it to HumLab.

4 RESULTS

Our research suggests that the value of the Humanities Lab at UCU lies in helping student develop an interdisciplinary research identity, rather than in directly preparing them for writing a BA-thesis within a specific discipline. The relevance of the course could be enhanced through making students relate the methods of the (prospective) discipline in which they will write their thesis to other humanities research methods, and by encouraging teachers in disciplinary courses to make explicit references to research methods.

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