



Teaching Broccoli Courses: Best Practices for Research Methods in Fashion

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President George H. W. Bush hated broccoli and could not be convinced to eat it regardless of the vegetable's health benefits. Based on our experiences, some fashion students view research methods more like broccoli than ice cream. Research Methods in Fashion (FSN 707) is a required undergraduate course with 150+ students. We implemented several innovations in this course during the pandemic, best practices are described below.

Best Practice #1 – Implement a blended learning format, design & an engaging course outline
The course included a 2-hour lecture that was timetabled as 1-hour asynchronously online and 1-hour live (all students together online synchronously using ZOOM), with a 1-hour tutorial class (5 sections, online synchronous). Blended learning combines online instruction and face to face classes (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004), providing students with flexibility to schedule their learning and reduce ZOOM fatigue. To facilitate communication, weekly lecture outlines with required readings, key terms and guiding questions were developed. Graphic icons on the weekly breakdown delineated exactly what students needed to watch, read, and do. Due dates were structured with week-long submission windows to provide students with workload flexibility.

Best Practice #2 – Stay in touch

During the pandemic we monitored students closely and practiced with empathy (See Hénard & Roseveare, 2012). We took attendance and followed up with anyone who missed a class or deadline to touch base and provide encouragement. We invited students to provide anonymous feedback through two Google surveys, one in Week 3 and another at the end of the course. We asked about their concerns and perceptions of what we were doing right as well as suggestions for improvement. We also asked for details about their use of the video lectures, weekly breakdowns, and lecture transcripts. Our approach was valued, a student stated, “Thank you for a great semester ... I appreciate how much you all care about the students and the course itself :)”.

Best Practice #3 – Scaffold assignments

Tutorial class exercises and assignments were scaffolded (Fisher & Justwan, 2018), that is, broken down into small chunks that were directly related to the final project, with feedback provided at multiple stages so that the final submission – a research proposal, was well informed. For example, to support learning how to do a literature review, students were put in groups to practice how to read critically using an article that investigated the use of images to portray

obesity in the media using content analysis. To learn more about this, please see our 1st place submission for the Rutherford Teaching Award.

Best Practice #4 – Create research and grad spotlights

Another innovation developed was the "Research Spotlight". This series was created to introduce students to tangible examples of fashion research, and to our diverse faculty as well as the wide range of different research specialties among the faculty. The research spotlight provided exposure to what research looks like from social science and indigenous perspectives, as well as practiced-based and humanities-based projects. A "Grad Spotlight" was also created to feature how alumni use research methods in their work. Again, this provided us with an opportunity to promote diversity. To create the spotlights, Faculty/Grads provided 7 slides (in PowerPoint) and narrated audio on their cell phones, including 1) a title slide (photo/title), 2) project title (ideally with a visual), 3) contextual information on the research problem, 4) the research question 5) Methods/theoretical framework 6) results and 7) future directions/next steps. Research spotlights were scheduled in the course's weekly breakdown to align with learning topics, providing student with a frame of reference and an understanding of the practical applications for research.

Best Practice #5 - Integrating the University's Zones through Fireside Chats

The Creative School at Toronto Metropolitan University has several Zones, these are interdisciplinary, experiential learning hubs. The Transmedia Zone is a community focused incubator for storytelling across entertainment media platforms and the Fashion Zone focuses on fashion startups, aiding product development. Interviews with select alumni were edited to create "Fireside Chats" to aid students with integrating theoretical aspects of research ethics, and EDI into real world applications. Several guiding questions related to the pragmatic application of research methods: "How do you employ research methods in your own creative practice/business? What are your main sources of data? What's one practical thing you've learned about doing research in your field?" Additionally, we asked about equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI): "How do you employ ethics as well as a focus on EDI in your own creative practice/business? How do you ensure your research is ethical?" "Fireside Chats" allowed students to integrate theoretical aspects of research ethics, and EDI into real world applications.

Conclusion

Teaching remotely during the pandemic has challenged educators and students. We have shared innovative strategies developed in a research methods course. Initiatives include new approaches to empathy and learning flexibility. We developed a course outline based on a blended learning format, video lectures were offered asynchronously and combined with a synchronous lecture. We scaffolded learning activities in synchronously scheduled tutorial classes to develop a research proposal. We shared practical applications of research methods through faculty and grad spotlights as well as fireside chats. Future developments include emphasis on student engagement activities such as using games to demonstrate learning of key terms used in research. We advocate these flexible, diverse learning strategies as applicable post-pandemic and beyond.

References

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