

Recentring Research Practices in Higher Education: Post Course Launch Analysis

Executive Summary

By Hannah Conner, M.A.

Overview: Developing research skills is a nonnegotiable for career readiness. Many higher education institutions acknowledge the need to create a baseline understanding regarding research skills, to ensure students will have success in multiple different avenues post-graduation (Troisi 2021, Lindstrom et al. 2022). Regardless of if research skills are built up through STEM based courses or through social sciences, there is a resounding pressure to ensure that students can be prepared to critically think about problems and develop ways to create solutions with the use of research.

Through my collaboration with the DEI Fellowship at the University of Northern Colorado, I have created an undergraduate course (SOC 395 Applied Research For Careers) that aims to develop career-based research skills through indigenous frameworks. The course launched Spring 2024 as an elective to all undergraduates, with a cap of 20 students. This paper will provide background on the current concerns of undergraduate level research courses, SOC 395 course successes and future needs, and ways to replicate this at other institutions. The hope is that this coursework does not just live at UNC but can be shared in a way where folks at other institutions can start questioning “best practices” at other institutions.

The Current Concern Historically, the field of research has been held by people in society with privileged identities (Remedios 2022, Seaton 2022). Most commonly, theorists and academics that developed what is still used as “best research practices” were predominately white, affluent, and educated men (Embrick and Moore 2020). Most social science classes that revolve around theory, and ultimately, the practice of research, tend to focus on the pillars of that scholarship (Crowley 2016). In sociology, the foundational theorists that

are generally covered in introductory courses are Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber (Crowley 2016). While these social theorists may be necessary as a foundational benchmark for theory in the Sociology field, the benchmark for other theorists that are nonwhite, non-male, and nonaffluent tend to be required at the discretion of the instructor.

This is not to say that the dominant theorists taught in this particular field should be excluded in future courses, but more so questions the way introductory courses specific to theory and research lends itself to the dominant hegemonic structure, while dually at the same time trying to teach students how to fight against the hegemonic structure (Seaton 2022). Other experts argue that the best way to actually disrupt our hegemonic structure is to introduce a new line of teaching, specifically from a decolonized point of view (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2019). This framework will be provided throughout this paper as the main way to deconstruct what we previously believe about best research practices, as well as create a roadmap for a future course that will focus on decolonizing research methodologies.

In order to decolonize research paradigms, indigenous researchers urge other experts in the field to go beyond surface level understanding of decolonization and what it means for research practice. Researcher Mirjam B.E. Held (2019) argues that current utilization of decolonized indigenous understanding of research and methodology is a surface use of work, rather than an intrinsic understanding that is being applied deeply. Decolonizing research should not be an afterthought, but rather a process that should be “developed, from scratch, conjointly between indigenous and western researchers” (Held 2019). By decolonizing research, power should be recentered to the participants, where participatory and transformative research methods recognize individual and community capabilities and assets. Instead of top-down research, many argue bottom up, where collective groups are part of the research process, developing the process alongside fellow researchers (Held 2019). This not only provides communities the ability to be stakeholders, but to gain back power by

maintaining authority over their own communities and potential research needs.

While many researchers are encouraging others to take a more transformative approach in western culture, there is still a divide to teaching this framework in the classroom. Upper-level college courses and graduate courses may offer decolonized research courses, although students at that point have to unlearn the previous research teachings provided in introductory courses. This paper argues that providing an introductory level course for students who have not taken research courses in the past is a practical way to ensure future researchers have the capacity to implement research from a decolonized lens.

Methodology: This course was developed through the University of Northern Colorado's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) fellowship. This two-year long fellowship was sponsored by Chevron, to develop sustainable DEI practices for the UNC and Northern Colorado community. With the collaboration of eight fellow cohort members, one exceptional expert advisor (Dr. Janine Weaver-Douglas), and support from the Sociology department, SOC 395 "Applied Research for Careers" was developed for any and all students, regardless of research background or major.

The development of the course was created with from indigenous frameworks in all aspects of research. After year one's systematic review of current relevant courses and syllabi, I focused on creating a course structure that mapped out all processes of social science research. I integrated current concerns with "best practices" taught through western research, and alternative ways of knowing, through indigenous research. When creating course materials for students used, I implemented strategies through [Universal Design](#).

Course Framework: The purpose of the course is to practice applied research relevant to different workforce industries with a foundation specific to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Through this course, we will learn how to create research processes from beginning to end on an applicable and relevant research project. We will define key elements of research theory and methodology,

focusing specifically on a diversity, equity, and inclusion framework. We will evaluate different forms of research methodology and theory and discuss how they have shaped our perceptions on the workforce. We will learn how to create a research project using theory and rigorous methodology that is needed in the real world and the local community. This course will help students strengthen their research skill set and help prepare you for careers in a multitude of different industries.

Course Learning Objectives:

1. Define and apply core sociological concepts to real world social problems.
2. Examine, discuss, and critique human behavior and social structure from a sociological perspective.
3. Apply social theories to current social issues.
4. Collect and analyze scholarly and professional research relevant to current social issues.
5. Demonstrate how one's own attitudes, behaviors, or beliefs compare or relate to those of other individuals, groups, communities, or cultures.
6. Apply rigorous research techniques in a project with real world implications.
7. Graduating sociology majors are able to develop effective communications of sociology through both written and oral work.
8. Use Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion framework to formulate research methodology

Course Design: The course design aimed at simplifying all information for students, by explicitly listing daily readings (if any), lecture slides or discussion, and any due materials on a given class day. After the first day of syllabus, the content was as followed:

- What is research?
- Review of scientific racism
- Ethics and research
- Identities and research
- Centering a decolonized lens
- Writing a research question
- Literature review overview
- Quantitative research methods

- Building a survey
- Qualitative Methods
- Conducting interviews
- Learning data systems software
- Interpreting data
- Inequity in research fields
- Writing methodology
- Writing results
- Moving forward in research

20 articles, five opinion-based blogs, and numerous social media examples were provided to students for the sections above. All articles mentioned in the course came from diversity, equity, and inclusion-based research, or specifically from indigenous researchers and activists.

The course had 5 main requirements: attendance, participation, an annotated bibliography, a cumulative research-based project (all students designed their own rubric for this assignment) and reading responses. The course was lecture based, with a heavy emphasis of open class discussions. All materials needed in the course were free to students, to lessen barrier of additional costs not covered by tuition.

Course Successes: Course successes are measured two ways. By students level of participation in the course, including time spent with the material, assignments turned in, and cumulative grade. The courses success is also defined through students perspectives and feedback once the course was completed.

Of the seven students enrolled in this course, they spent a cumulative time of 45 hours on the canvas shell, or an average time of 6.43 hours for the semester. As there were no required assignments to fill out via Canvas (all assignments were file upload), time spend on Canvas can include checking assignments, in course lectures, and assigned readings.

Of the six assignments students were graded in, the class averaged at an 88% work completion rate. In other words, of the 42 assignments for the

whole of the course, only five assignments were never turned in.

While grades are not always an indicator of success, it is imperative to know the student pass rate for the course, to ensure equity within the classroom. Six out of the seven student in the course passed, and the overall average cumulative grade was 87.68%.

To better understand student perspective, open-ended comments submitted through course evaluation have been reviewed for constructive feedback and potential future considerations. Five of the seven students filled out the course evaluation and provided feedback for further review.

Feedback for the question, “What are the three things you are most likely to continue with or use after this course?” is highlighted below.

- *“The indigenous paradigm, certain perspectives, and methods of research.”*
- *“1. Understanding indigenous paradigms of research
2. Understanding ethical dilemmas and possible pitfalls
3. Knowing how identity plays into research and how it can skew data”*
- *“No comment”*
- *“Using my knowledge of decolonized practices, challenging western viewpoints, and the difficulty of integrating the two.”*
- *“-I will be able to critically view the research practices I was taught prior to this course. - I will be able to apply more ethical practices, and just more ways on thinking into my future research projects (or other works) - The content of this course- although focused on research specifically- is applicable to a lot. I have a different perspective of higher education and tools I can use.”*

The feedback indicates that the course effectively enhanced students' understanding of indigenous research paradigms, ethical

considerations, and the role of identity in research. It also successfully promoted critical thinking and decolonized practices, challenging students to integrate these perspectives with traditional western viewpoints. Overall, students found the content highly applicable to their future research and broader academic pursuits. This suggests that the course met its objectives in providing a comprehensive and transformative learning experience.

Feedback for the question, "Other Comments" is highlighted below.

- *"I think this is an important class that should continue."*
- *"I enjoyed this course and hope to see it continue in some way in the Sociology department. I believe this class serves as a great way to really understand the type of work being done in the Sociology field, as well as its uncomfortable history and possible risks to doing research. I believe adding to this class or combining it with another to create a Research Ethics in Sociology course would be incredible -- with any scientific field there must be in-depth discussion of ethical risks, and the same should be for Sociology. It would serve the department well to keep this course in the roster even with a few changes to the material."*
- *"There should be a few more assignments so missing or failing one won't make you absolutely fail the class."*
- *"Hannah is KICKASS professor. I have never truly felt like my voice had value in class until I took a class with Hannah."*

The feedback underscores the importance and value of the course, suggesting it should continue to be offered within the Sociology department. Students appreciate the course's focus on understanding the sociology field, including its ethical challenges, and propose expanding it to cover research ethics more comprehensively. Additionally, there is a suggestion to adjust the course structure to include more assignments,

making the grading system more flexible. Finally, the instructor receives strong positive feedback for her ability to make students feel valued and included, which significantly enhances the learning experience. These insights provide a clear direction for potential improvements and affirm the strengths of the current course offering.

Limitations: Despite the promising feedback and successful outcomes of SOC 395, there are several limitations to consider. First, the sample size of the course was relatively small, with only seven students enrolled. This limited sample may not fully capture the diversity of perspectives and experiences that a larger class might provide.

Finally, the implementation of this course at other institutions may face challenges related to differing institutional cultures, resource availability, and faculty expertise in indigenous research methodologies.

Discussion: The analysis of student feedback reveals that SOC 395 successfully met its objectives by enhancing students' understanding of indigenous research paradigms, ethical considerations, and the influence of identity in research. The course effectively challenged traditional western viewpoints and promoted critical thinking through decolonized practices.

Students appreciated the applicability of the course content to their future academic and professional endeavors, indicating that the course had a transformative impact on their perspectives. The suggestion to increase the number of assignments reflects a desire for a more balanced assessment structure, which could help accommodate varying student needs and reduce the risk of failure due to a single missed or poorly executed assignment.

Additionally, the strong positive feedback for the instructor underscores the importance of having passionate and inclusive educators who can create a supportive learning environment. While the course has demonstrated initial success, future iterations could benefit from incorporating a larger and more diverse student body to validate these

findings further. Expanding the course content to include more comprehensive coverage of research ethics and practical applications in various fields could enhance its relevance and appeal.

Looking to the future: The launch of SOC 395: Applied Research for Careers, focusing on decolonizing research practices, has shown promising results in its initial offering. Student feedback highlights the course's effectiveness in promoting indigenous research paradigms, ethical awareness, and critical thinking skills. The positive reception and suggestions for improvement provide valuable insights for refining the course and expanding its reach.

By addressing the limitations and incorporating the proposed enhancements, SOC 395 has the potential to become a cornerstone course in sociology departments and beyond. Its emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion, coupled with a strong foundation in applied research skills, prepares students to navigate and challenge the complexities of modern research landscapes. The continued development and dissemination of this course framework can contribute to broader efforts in decolonizing higher education and fostering more inclusive and equitable research practices.40