Interviewer

So can you briefly describe your experience teaching undergraduates with primary sources?

Respondent

So, I think....The use of primary sources is part of an overall attempt of making the teaching more interactive, more concrete, and - in particular, on my own experience- I was also trying to show more skills that could be translated to the job market. And so the data or collecting a set of things, not as we have done in the past, was one side of this sort of umbrella. I tried to make the class more fun, more meaningful, with more translatable skill and more concrete. Because, particularly in political science, sometimes the classes are theoretical and so the students will have an assessment where we just do part of the work of collecting and cleaning the data and this more or less one of the reasons we are doing it.

Interviewer

When have you learned to teach undergraduates with primary sources?

Respondent

So the first, I was with a consortium of Universities called Participedia, like Wikipedia but for participation. This consortium has more than 30 Universities, and we have been trying to crowdsource case studies of participatory processes, but it didn't really work. Like any other NGOs none wanted to crowdsource their own time. One of the thing that worked really well, was the teaching modules because we did a class on participation, but we asked students to write a case as it was a proper research project. And student loved research projects. And I am going to try to teach this class, I added an additional case study because I have, I do a lot of consulting, so I have a lot of friends working within the participatory process area. So I pre-contacted my friends, I had a list of them, and students, basically were supposed to do an interview call with these people, that are basically professional, and contact them, interview them do a case study and write one of those reports and write for the network. And they love the fact that they were working on a complete case study from start to finish. Before that, I took a class as part of my training that had an experiment and an ethnography component. So part of the class I took in the US had a primary component. In one of the class, we had to come up with our own experiment. The other class we had to do some ethnography. And so in the US, there is a tradition of doing this and I was a student in them. I also developed a Horizon grant on playing a game that was designed for students and that had again primary data constrain. All this showed me how engaging, these approaches are.

Interviewer

Did you say you created a game?

Respondent

Together with a group of people. Yes. So this was a big Horizon grant that run between 2015 and 2017. And it was a grant about building a digital platform for participation. One of the things we built was a two hour role playing games where we simulated how to do a consultation. The game has designed like problems and failures so people are pushed to fail so that they learn through failure. And they are happy to play as they have something different. Oh, yeah, that's another example of how to play with primary data.

Interviewer

So did you see any support or instruction on how to teach?

Respondent

Here no, but I've just arrived. I lot of my colleagues have been using this technique for a long time. I was just talking about this today as in international relations are using an online game. In this game, the students do a simulation, and then they play against each other. And then the class that I was asked to teach from January, it has been running for five or six years, also uses primary data. The class from Participedia was taught also here, the one in which the students have to come up with a case study. So in, in general, I think that there is a long tradition of primary data and also the statistics class asks students to do a little work on that. However, I haven't even started the PGCAP(Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice). I am really new. I just arrived in September, so I think there is some support, I might be wrong, I just didn't know.

Interviewer

Do you use any ideas or collections of sources that you've gained from other people in your teaching with primary sources?

Respondent

Participedia has actually a lot of syllabi, a lot of interactive games and in general, this is a good network of people I have been working with. I never actually used the book, but I know that there are, and I found, some articles the lists games. This is one of the things, but that specific on games not really primary data because you don't need a game to use primary data. So no, the general answer is more likely: I don't have a book or a system of references, I use mostly these Participedia resources.

Interviewer

And does that mean is that the same then for making your ideas and collections of sources available to others, do you have anything that you keep and you then share?

Respondent

Yeah. So, again, most of my research is quantitative based, I usually do mapping and data collection and I usually release them in Creative Commons licence. I have released a couple of datasets that way. It's unusual in political science. It's even unusual inside Participedia. It just that I was influenced a lot by my friends the are hackers. They usually release the data. The consortium usually releases the data in data verse, and there is an online database for the United States, but given that I was trained a lot by friends in GDPR and I don't like the data to be there. I would prefer to have a database here. So, I've just realised it on a Creative Commons waiting for the European Union to do something about it.

Interviewer

Okay. Thank you. Can you now think about the specific course that you've designed? Tell me a little bit about that module.

Respondent

Sure, there are two classes. The one I did not design is the one that I taught last semester. That class is called ClassA. This class is a little bit about political psychology, but it uses a lot of surveys. The students are asked to do a group assignment, in which they download survey dataset like the British electorate study dataset and they play with it and they create some sort of data analysis. Given that this class was designed to have no requirements, it is a little tricky because we cannot ask them to do any statistics. We teach them to do very basic newspaper style data visualisation e.i. graphic means, pie chart, something like that. Some of the students are from political science because political science has a lot of cross listed modules (I'm still confused about it as I just joined), and some have done statistics. So the one that has done statistics use it in the group assignment. I think we had more than 60 people in the class, so the groups were around five people. We had around 12 groups. I think ten did it fine, while two couldn't do it. They really couldn't. We have a seminar so we have a two hour class and a weekly seminar. The weekly seminar usually goes through step by step a piece of the primary data project, because this is something I also used when I was at my previous institution in Canada. In the other class (ClassB), the one about the consortium, the students were asked to write a case study. But again, I was using the seminar to split the project in bits. So it is almost like having homework. They had first to write a literature review, then they had to come up with the grand literature review research question, then figured out an interview. Step one was an interview base and then write and upload the report. A big research project that is a little bit scary if a person has never done it, it's transformed in small pieces. This approach is doable for small classes. In fact, that was a class of 25. This was a class of 60, we couldn't really do it exactly in the same way, but one of the tricks I think it's helpful to guide the students or you have enough weekly homework. There is not much tradition here in the UK of having weekly homework like in the US and then you have the weekly part of the project that leads easily to the primary data collection research because then you literally split the project into pieces that become their homework. By doing each homework you then complete the project. Without that becomes more complicated, you have to do group base work and students don't really like that. So that was the last semester. This semester is more fun, and more experimental. So, this class is a sort of intro to research design. Both I and my co-designer noticed while mentoring some of the students in the dissertation, that they had some specific issues. So this class (ClassC) is really targeting and in part trying to solve those issues. Students have a hard time writing what is called a critical literature review. It's not just the summary of the literature, but you actually say something more about the literature and you criticise it. The first part of this class is about that. And the second part is to come up with your first randomised controlled trial, the first experiment, because now more and more in social science, we use experiments. This class is particularly focused on survey experiments. It is basically like a survey, but there are two versions of the survey and the people are randomised to see one version of the other. And it's used for example, to study the fact of gender bias or competence, for example, we know that women are constantly rated less than men in the reviews of students. Right. And so by simply having the students read the same thing about a man and a woman and then doing the survey, you know as an average the woman is rated less. So that's a typical example of a survey experiment. And so we're pushing them to do one of those. We think it's fairly easy because they can use isurvey that is this facility that the university has, and that's what they're going to do. This is going to be a big challenge. We're going to have more than one hundred returns to grade; it is going to be a big task. We don't know how different are going to be pilot.

Interviewer

So this is not running yet, right?

Respondent

It is. I'm going to teach this is just nobody nobody's done it yet, before. Okay, so it's a new methodology module (ClassC) running in parallel with statistics. So the concept that we use in this is also taught at the same time in statistics. It's a sort of applied and concrete version of statistics, because a lot of political scientists, actually hate it. That's what we are getting from students. What the statisticians wanted from us were examples, but we thought that the problem is not having more political science example. The problem is really to give them an entire concrete approach, like 'this is used for'/'why', and you can really do an experiment. That's what we're doing in parallel of statistic. This is an adaptation of a class I run at another US institution. That was all about experiments; it was probably my first class on data. I actually published a paper out of that class. It's a lot of fun. That class cross listed with master students and only some undergrads are taking it. This is mandatory for first year undergraduate.

Interviewer

Which one would you like to talk about when we are digging a bit deeper?

Respondent

I think the second one (ClassC) is more fun. Also, it's mine, I designed it, right.

Interviewer

So how are you, incorporating primary sources in this module?

Respondent

So, in this module (ClassC), I am actually pushing the students to create a little experiment, and so the students will have to incorporate primary data. We're constantly providing them examples and we're telling them three types of design they have to follow. However, they're going to have to design their own survey, find around 20 people to do the survey and about the same to do the experiment, 10 will receive survey A and 10 will receive survey B. We thought it was quite feasible and they will get to try the methodology.

That's the way we are incorporating primary data.

Interviewer

And why did you choose that way?

Respondent

Because we discussed a lot the typology and the experiment we could do. And this is one of the easiest ways to obtain ethical approval. This is basically a modified survey and it's on us. We discussed other approaches, for example, sending emails to politicians to see if they respond more to setup type of people that are part of my research. That requires a more complicated ethical approval for the students. And similarly, there are other experiments but we found the survey experiment was easy. We also noticed that students are using surveys in their dissertation and that in political science it is the number one methodology because it's so easy. In addition, iSurvey (University of Southampton survey software) was already there, and free even if it's clunky. A lot of students complain about it. One of my recommendations would be actually to make it easier because they could use Google Form or Survey Monkey that are way easier to use than iSurvey. So we have you have to push it a lot. Somehow, it would be helpful to create a sort of support and customize it. I am sort of doing it, I'm actually calling them on Friday because in three weeks we're teaching the students how to use iSurvey. We'll have to learn it and teach it to them, but it would be helpful if this becomes a recurrent format to have like our own version of pre made, isurvey template.

Interviewer

Do you think you can do it?

Respondent

I don't know, it's coding, right? You can do anything!

Interviewer

And can you make templates out of it?

Respondent

Yeah, I have no clue. Yeah. I've never used iSurvey before.

Interviewer

What challenges do you face in incorporating primary sources in this? You mentioned about the ethical....

Respondent

The ethical approval, I haven't done it yet for this, but for the previous class (ClassA), I did last semester it's a blanket ethical approval for the entire class. So the students don't have to do an individual one. So it was fairly easy to do, probably too easy. I would have liked them to experience the challenge of doing it, I'm sure it's up to us probably. Maybe, if there was like an intermediate version....like having a specific class where people come and teach because in that class they just don't do anything like that, I did it for that. It saves a lot of time. We had a conversation about ethic, but I don't think they really appreciated how much time it takes usually. It is a very academic skill, probably, 90% of them don't care and never have to do it again. As usual, there are trade-offs. That was one challenge. Then we had two groups out of 12 that really did not know how to do it; they couldn't do it. You never know, it could be just people that don't want to do it. They completed the big literature review when we asked very clearly they had to download data and at least come up with some visualisation.

Interviewer

So, they had to come up with data and make some kind of visualisation?....

Respondent

We really pointed them in the direction of the data. We said: "this is the data set". One group did a survey experiment because the class was not just about secondary data. One group used an Ipsos Mori (Market research Company) survey, so they're very creative. But there were two groups that could not do it. So, there is an additional challenge for the students but I think it's a manageable challenge, and I think there was only one student that worked alone because he did not like his group. So that was a success. In general, I think the structural challenge here is related to the homework I was saying before. In the US, when you have the TAs (Teaching Assistants) that allow you to correct the homework every week. Then, everything becomes easier for this type of classes, because you can split the research project and the use of primary data in small chunks. Here, we tried to do it, but we couldn't grade as many small chunks. It just me and the co-designer of the module, so we couldn't grade every week 60 small chunks, it is just too much work. That could be something to think about. If we're doing a more research oriented class with more primary data, I have more researchers and more TAs, students get more feedback. It doesn't even need to be graded, it could just be pass or fail. So the students are not worrying from having so much assessment, but just having somebody giving feedback. That is one thing. The other thing is that some institutions to have clinics for software usage. Most of our students don't know how to use the software. Having a clinic that runs all year around where our students can go, bring their research project and get out, would be a centralised support system for these classes. In this case, if the student has a problem, he/she has to come to me. I can solve the problem but for logistical issues - I just have two office hours - it might not work for the student. If instead there could be something like...they are usually called 'name of the software'-clinic, that could be an incentive to run this. At that point, the teacher doesn't have to do their job and can say 'when you have a problem with the software, go to talk to the specialist', and you can just go.

Interviewer

Okay, thank you. So you mentioned about TAs. Do you have anyone else who is like a co instructor or an archivist or do you have any help with teaching with primary sources?

Respondent

So, both classes were taught by two teachers in the first one I was the convener and my colleague was the second teacher, this one instead she's the convener, and I'm the person that co-teaches with her. We have teaching assistants, but our rule is that they basically run a seminar every two weeks. And that's the type of help we have.

Interviewer

Okay. And how do you communicate with them about what to do?

Respondent

Emails. Mostly emails and Skype.

Interviewer

Okay. So moving on to finding primary sources. So thinking about undergraduate teaching in general, how do you go about finding the primary sources?

Respondent

I think the first class (ClassA) applies more, right? The first class is focused on surveys and it's not difficult to find them. The second class (ClassC)in which they have to come up with their own data, it is also not difficult because they just do the survey. In these two specific classes that are not a lot of difficulties. In the class (ClassB) I taught in Canada, I used my network because students had to write a case study on a participatory process. So those are my three experiences. I think, apart from like for the class on surveys, having a centralised website with links to all the possible surveys is something we do. We have three or four big and famous places where to find datasets. The teacher themselves can find primary resources because we do research on these things, so it's actually easier almost.

Interviewer

Do you keep a collection of digital resources of this course?

Respondent

Yeah, the surveys are just on a website, so we know them by heart. That's not so important. e.i the Euro barometer, everybody knows them. And so, I don't really keep them.

Interviewer

Do you have any challenges in finding appropriate sources?

Respondent

I guess so. There is one challenge, but it's just because some of these surveys have data release policy that is antiquated. For example, the British electorate study survey releases the data in formats that are not open source. It is the dataset I recommend. They are releasing the data in a standard format, and in SPSS format because probably specific programmes used by the research team, instead of just releasing it in text format. Those are things that are just disappearing. I think more and more the open source standard, it is becoming the standard. So in general, I had to translate the data because the students didn't have the software because they're expensive or didn't know translate data. In political science, we teach Excel, because they think it's a more 'transferable skill' that one of the statistics packages. So I translated this dataset to excel and gave it to them. But it's okay, it is not a big problem.

Interviewer

And how do your students find prime resources? You mentioned it before, there are websites they get to and they create them as well....

Respondent

I always point them to the direction of finding them. In the last semester class, we had the list of potential surveys, and most of them use them. In the class I taught in my previous institution, I basically pre contacted the people I had worked with in participation, and then pointed the students to select one out of 12, I think, or 20. I forgot how many they were on the list. I think this is specific of undergraduate teaching if we're teaching non undergrad - at that point - it is pedagogic that they have to do the research by themselves and find the data. I think for the undergrad level, you want at least to give them five or six options, then they can also do the custom one. For the experiment, one is super easy because at that point you create your own data. It's all about coming up with the correct methodology, but then we're interviewing or surveying people.

Interviewer

Okay, thank you. How do the ways in which you teach your primary sources to relate to the goals of student learning in your discipline?

Respondent

I think it varies, giving there is so much weight on finding the data, cleaning the data, analysing the data, and writing a report; these type of classes usually are lighter on content and more about learning and methodology learning and applied skill on how to manage data. These should not be the only classes, because they need the content too. However, they really hit all the learning outcomes about how to do real research because they're doing a real piece of research, also a lot are transferable skills, e.i. managing and presenting data, writing a report and visualising data. Some of these classes are presentations, we didn't include a presentation but other colleagues have a presentation. At that point, it's easier to grade them. In a small class of 30 people, it's easier to have a part on a primary day so they're all doing a presentation on the group. So I think these classes really hit the academic research and transferable skills learning outcomes.

Interviewer

Okay, thank you. Do you teach undergraduates what a primary source is?

Respondent

Yes, but that's part of the theoretical part where we're teaching the difference between primary and secondary sources. Primary data is the one you collect, but we don't really go deep in philosophy or science at this level. I don't think we have a single class in the philosophy of science. Something I will like to have but it's unclear if the students would be interested. So one of the lessons from the consortium network for example, because they taught these type of classes in 20 different universities, is that it's better to put the theory at the end. So you start with a bunch of examples, you asked them to write their own case studies and have the last three or four lectures about the theory of democracy. Otherwise, they actually don't have enough time to do first theory and then practice, at the entry level. And again, this is the average students because the students are heterogeneous. You're going to always have the ones that can be challenged a lot more, but the average student seems to be really interested in the concrete part, managing data, playing with data, writing a case study and hearing stories about the how data was used and more. In fact, my suggestion to the statistics module lead was to teach this way that class. They don't want to teach a statistic problem based, but that's what I would do. And that's how for example, a lot of US departments now are teaching the statistic sequence, not in the way it was. Basically, it is the theory, theory, and examples, but really you want to go through a problem and then they give you the tools to solve the problem.

Interviewer

To what extent is it important to you that your students develop information literacy or civic engagement when working with primary sources?

Respondent

For me, literacy is one thing you can gauge. I think these classes are fun, exactly because they have so much to transferable skills and one of them is the ability to interpret and analyse data in the newspaper and other things. We are really teaching right now things like how to identify causality, inference and all those. Again, it's unclear how much, what percentage of the class is actually speaking that deeply, because we're doing theory first. We're really trying to add a lot of examples and things.....we're showing a lot of bad examples, on how you should not do it. Then we show a good example and we try to link the two. It's very difficult to challenge the students the proper amount because if he is challenged of too much at every level they then fall through. The way I understand civic engagement has to do with like engaging the public, not my students so....maybe in different subjects when they're going out to museums and maybe taking stuff out to show to other people....If these type of classes have for example a conference, in which the students present their work, so the consortium class is designed for that. That's why the students love it so much because their cases are uploaded in this 'Wikipedia' it is there, with their name. In the two classes, I have been talking there is nothing like this. I'm teaching the third class on media, in which we decided to substitute one essay with a blog post. It will teach them the different interaction on journals, and so they have to write a blog post. This is something that is traditionally done in here. This is the first time I did it, but I am being told the students like it. So, in general, my experience in Participedia is that students really enjoy if there is a public facing element that stays there and remains there. It's true that when the outcome is an oral presentation, some are really shy. So again, there's always a trade-off there of which one of your students is actually enjoying that type of work, and which one we are losing.

Interviewer

Think the definition of public civic engagement is slightly different here. As part of this project is more on the line on how important is for your students to understand how to use primary sources when addressing big issues? Which is pretty much what you have covered before when talking about examples...

Respondent

That's what you're doing all the time in political sciences. I guess in other disciplines, you might use primary data to calculate a star or the atmosphere and so they have to look at it separately. When we use primary data, we are discussing politics. And so most of our usage of primary data is something that has a civic engagement component.

Interviewer

Okay, so the next question is in what formats do students engage with prime resources? But, but from what you said it's all digital assets and other subjects you've got print editions digital images on a course management platform, documents in an archive....

Respondent

Okay. So, when we are pointing them to download data, it is digital. When we're pushing them to create their own data, they are interviewing people or doing a survey, to a digital survey. The last semester this group did their own survey paper, survey, and then distributing it. And so they interacted with people in that way. So it depends. But typically it is in electronic format.

Interviewer

Another question which might not apply to you is: do you or students visit Special Collections, archives or museums?

Respondent

No, no, I would love to do a class on art.

Interviewer

Would you do a class on art?

Respondent

Yes, turning participation in art. One of the things I would like to do if I have time. Right now, we were really following what the students are asking us to do when taking the class.

Interviewer

Do your students use any digital tools to interact with or present sources?

Respondent

They use PowerPoints and standard software like Stata or SPSS. These are statistical packages. The university has a licence. So, they can get it for free.

Interviewer

And to what extend these formats and tools are pedagogically important to you?

Respondent

So, actually, learning some of the software has a really important employability outcome, and is just down to the curriculum. We probably don't teach them enough to become really proficient in any software. So, there should be a redesign of the curriculum and a decision to push more computer literacy. It's a big payoff though. A lot of the students that choose political science choose it because they want to discuss politics. It would be a decision above my pay grade, basically, to transform or open up a subsection of political science that is a mix of computer science and political science. It's becoming more and more trendy like data science is becoming a big thing. And so, that might be more a master level type of choice. There are Universities that choose to do it that like at all levels. Like my undergrad University in Italy is economics, closer to political science, as everybody learns python. And everybody has to learn python. And at the moment political science is choosing to push Excel, because they think that whatever job you do afterwards, you will use Excel, right? It kind of makes sense, thinking about it, because we don't have.....like a medical studies have a doctor in mind as a profession, but in political science, we're looking at our alumni....they go all over the place. We had from politicians to investment bankers. It's really hard to push one sort of box because it is not going to fit everybody. So, I guess it's fine. And we have a limit on the number of students because I could easily teach stats using statistical packages. But then I would probably have four students. It's not really economical.

Interviewer

So do you encounter any challenges relating to the formats and tools the students are engaging...

Respondent

The students don't know how to use them. So I have to teach them how to use them. So the seminar I am about to teach in 10 minutes, ad example, is about how to use Excel graph.

Interviewer

What advice would you give to colleagues that are new to teaching, and how to use primary sources?

Respondent

I think, paradoxically, most of the colleagues in their research are using primary sources. So for me it's easier to teach using primary sources because it's closer to my researcher job. I guess for a person that doesn't do research and is primarily a teacher, then at that point, it becomes more and more complicated. And, but for me it is more natural to teach in this way because you're teaching what you're really doing. And the recommendation I think the recommendation is to make it fun and to really split it into pieces because for us it looks super easy, but it's actually complicated. When I'm imagining the assignment I basically create a sort of guide for dummies; literally step by step, like the one you can find in web pages that said: "you click here". That's the level I'm thinking usually when I create this type of assignment, and you always have time to make it difficult in class. So I would target the lowest bar in the class. Another interesting thing is that I have friends that have flipped completely the class. They have flipped the theory - this was at statistics class or something like that. The theory becomes videos, and in class, they just work on the computer with the students doing primary data.

Interviewer

So the theory was on video?

Respondent

Yes, everything was on video as statistic is fairly standard. So the theory goes on videos and in class there are 4 TS and the professor did a big into to the class. He did actually studied the methodology and publish it, because he did it at the same time. Some students took the class this way and some in the traditional way, and he shows that the learning average is the same. Some of the students learn more, but they are less scared, and they're more willing to take an additional statistics class. This seems a stupid outcome but in political science, in which two thirds of the students hate statistics and have done political science not to do math, it's a very interesting engagement. Maybe in economics and statistics, it would not be helpful, but even in this type of social science in which we have students are really scared and where there is a lot of discussion about gender - because women usually do less science less math - there's lots of things to think about these type of approaches.

Interviewer

Future. What challenges or opportunities will people have encountered, you think, when teaching undergraduates with primary sources?

Respondent

I think, again, the possibility of being a bit more flexible. What I've noticed here is how autocratic is the system of assessment and everything has his own system of codes and it's less free than the US counterpart. I was way freer in Canada when I was proposing things like this. So, exploring and giving more freedom to do some pilot projects on different assessment. I think the feeling of all the colleagues is that in political science we are over assessing. We're giving too much assessment in a traditional form, too many quizzes, too many essays. Essays are kind of useless, apart from that they learn how to write. But that could be done also in a more systematic way. So I think to have a little bit more freedom to experiment because there are more fun things we could do outside any of the more traditional forms. For example, going on the field and doing things in the city that we could easily do: working on ethnography, things like this type of reading novelty assessment like doing a game. So there are there are also little things that make us feel more limited by the bureaucracy and by all these legal checking all these boxes. Maybe I'm wrong because it just arrives, I don't know.

Interviewer

Can I just ask before we finish: how do you normally cite or reference primary sources?

Respondent

It depends, like, usually the person that collects data recommend the own citation method. So for mine, it is released in Creative Commons, so this is the way you should cite it. However, most people don't, and it is weird because it's in creative commons and they don't cite it. It is funny that people are used to cite a paper that uses my data instead citing my data. But that's a problem of political sciences. There is not a huge recognition unless your dataset becomes globally famous. None reference a small data set at the moment. So actually having very good and strong guidelines from social sciences and a premium that will recognise the work. At the moment, in my CV the fact that I created two data set counted zero. What counts is a publication, and it makes sense. But maybe there could be some sort of, I don't know, recognition, about that.

Interviewer: Thank you. Transcribed by https://otter.ai