

Summative Observation of Steve Monroe, Semester 2, AY 2021-22

Observation participant: Steve Monroe

Observation date: February 3, 2022

Observer: Chris Howell

Course: YSS3231: Methods in the Social Sciences

I observed the first hour of a two-hour seminar on the topic of ethics and research. This course is taught with one lecture to both seminars on a Monday followed by a two-hour session with each seminar on Thursday. Prior to the observation, I met with Steve to learn about his teaching goals and any concerns he had about the course, and we met again the day after the observation to discuss his reflections on how the class had gone.

The course

Methods in the Social Sciences is required for Global Affairs and Urban Studies majors and one of two options for fulfilling a methods requirement for PPE. It is also an elective methods course for several other social science majors. The course is designed to introduce students to research design as well as qualitative and quantitative methods. As with most required courses, particularly those containing quantitative content, there is an added degree of difficulty for an instructor in having some students in the course less by choice than by necessity.

Steve inherited the course and while he has been able to revise it in certain ways, especially by his choice of cases and readings used, its broad content and structure are set by its nature as a required course and preparation for capstone work in the social sciences. Again, this makes the course somewhat harder to teach than an elective in which the instructor has full control over the design of the course.

In conversation prior to the observation, Steve explained his approach to the course, emphasizing practicality (that the course will help the capstone project) and the ability to think critically, assess evidence and choose the most appropriate research method for the project. This is the second time that Steve has taught this course and he also explained that he was concerned to ensure that no one methodological approach appear to be favored over the others – an important concern given the range of majors with their own methodological preferences represented among the students taking the course.

The seminar

In the lecture the previous Monday, Steve had introduced students to the topic of ethics in research, the IRB process, the difference between positionality and reflexivity, the Belmont Principles for ethical research, and a range of sources of ethical concern in research. This seminar meeting was designed to illustrate those ethical concerns through case studies, and to have students use what they had learned from the lecture to interrogate examples of research for potential ethical considerations.

This seminar has 8 students in total, 1 of them on zoom. Hybrid classes are quite difficult, particularly when there are only one or two students on Zoom. Steve handled the situation well,

periodically checking in with the student on Zoom and pairing him with another student for small group discussion. All students but one arrived on time.

The seminar began with a few minutes of announcements after which Steve introduced the first lab, entitled *Researcher Meets (Ethics) Critic*. The lab involved the students reading an example of a pre-analysis plan for a research experiment and using it to raise potential ethical concerns. Steve reminded students of the Belmont Principles from the lecture. The pre-analysis plan (PAP) had been written in 2017 by Steve and his co-author to investigate whether priming for insecurity changes preferences for female leadership in Afghanistan. After reading, students were put in groups of 2 and 3 and given 10 minutes to raise and discuss potential ethical concerns about the PAP. Following this, a longer discussion involving the whole class took place.

Following the lab, Steve introduced the second seminar activity, a discussion of Alice Goffman's *On the Run*, again with the purpose of identifying ethical concerns with the research. I was able to stay for the first part of this discussion but not for its entirety. It is worth noting, in light of Steve's concern about not privileging any one method over another, that the seminar involved examination of examples of both quantitative and qualitative methods research.

Observations

Steve has an easy rapport with the students in the seminar, greeting them by name as they enter, asking about their CNY celebrations, taking student comments seriously and scanning the space constantly to ensure that all students both have the opportunity to participate and are recognized as soon as they indicate an interest in doing so.

The lab was extremely well-crafted. Using a concrete PAP as a case for students to critique made the discussion more focused and less abstract. Students know enough about the situation in Afghanistan that the ethics of conducting research there were clearly important in their minds (to be clear the PAP was written, and the research conducted, before the Taliban took full control last year). I wondered, while the students were reading the PAP if they would hesitate to raise ethical concerns given that the research was undertaken by the instructor. In fact, students seemed to have little compunction in raising concerns. The ensuing discussion was lively with students raising several potential ethical issues and suggesting alternative ways of conducting the research that might avoid those issues.

Steve is a strong discussion leader. He listened carefully, sharpened the argument being made occasionally, and asked other students to comment on the issue before responding himself. After the same ethical issue was raised several times, Steve carefully shifted the discussion onto a new track. He used further examples of research to illustrate points made by students. The discussion was for the most part of the call-and-response variety, between each student and the instructor, rather than among the students, but the small group discussion enabled students to talk to each other, and in the full class discussion, students quite frequently referenced a point made by another student indicating a high level of participation. All but one of the students spoke multiple times.

After about 45 minutes, Steve shifted discussion to the ethics of data analysis itself, again using examples of cases where concerns about data manipulation of various types had been raised. He explained replication expectations for quantitative research and asked students why replication might not be appropriate for some qualitative research. As a quantitative scholar himself, Steve was careful to show respect for different considerations and ethical standards in qualitative research methods.

On about the hour mark, when the class moved onto the second seminar activity, discussing *On the Run*, Steve opened up class discussion by asking for first impressions of the reading, before situating its context and elaborating on the concerns among scholars about the research. This prompted a lively free-flowing discussion which helped encourage student participation before a more primed and focused discussion. When I asked about this technique in our post-observation conversation, Steve said that he used it to lower barriers to participation; it succeeded.

Achievements

Steve teaches a course that is required in two majors and relied upon in several others, and serves as the primary methodological preparation for capstone work in these majors. That it be taught effectively is therefore extremely important in the social science division. On the evidence of this classroom observation, Steve is a highly effective and intentional instructor of this course. He thinks carefully about each activity and how best to introduce the material and engage students. Steve balances the need to periodically present the material himself with engaging students in discussion of the issues raised by research methodology. At each point in the seminar, Steve clearly articulated the goals of the activity and how they link to the wider goals of the unit within the syllabus. He follows his lesson plan without it seeming forced, or an interruption of the flow of discussion. The use of student comments and questions to clarify concepts and on occasion pivot to new material was quite seamless. In other words, there did not appear to be a trade-off between the effective presentation of material and an interactive classroom with high levels of student participation. The use of case studies to illustrate research ethics, and to serve as the basis of discussion about those ethics, was an effective way of making a set of ethical principles concrete and important. Students with diverse methodological backgrounds, majors and research goals are likely to feel comfortable and engaged in the course. Above all the seminar achieved its goals of equipping students to think carefully about how to engage in ethical research, and to recognize research that is ethically problematic.

Areas for Improvement and Experimentation

Greater interaction among students, rather than between student and instructor, is something that Steve wants to encourage. That is probably easier to achieve in an elective where the substantive material is something that students have chosen to engage with. Nonetheless, we talked about two ways to get students to talk to each other more. One is debate formats and Steve is already experimenting with that approach. The other is to mine student comments written before class to identify points of difference and then put those students into dialogue with each other in class.

Steve also identified tardiness on the part of certain students as a problem. We talked about either talking to the student(s) concerned after class or in office hours to first find out if there is a reason for the tardiness and then seek agreement on improved performance.

When faculty present their own work in the classroom, it can be highly effective as well as quite exciting for students. I did wonder for this lab, where the goal was to invite student critique of the methods, whether there might be some small value in initially anonymizing the PAP to see if student reactions are any different when they do not know the provenance of what they are being asked to critique, and only after the initial discussion revealing that information. This is a small point and only a tentative suggestion. It may well make no difference, and Steve certainly elicited critique from the students in the seminar.

Written on February 8, 2022



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