In The Name of Research: Implicit versus Explicit Articulation of Skills

Kate Edenborg

The purpose of this project was to start to develop a way to measure students’ self-efficacy with the Research Skills Development (RSD) framework levels, especially since undergraduate research can come in many forms. This exploratory study starts to examine how comfortable students are with “research” and their own research skills regardless of how/if those terms are used in the instruction or assignments. This research involved participants from one course that provided a representative sample of first-year students at UW Stout in a required course. Participants in the second course were a representative sample of upper-level students within a specific program and area of professionalization. The third course was a representative sample of general upper-level students in an elective course.

This preliminary study starts to explore how students view research. The project was inspired by many questions: Does it help or hurt students’ efficacy to call research, research? Do first-year students need to ease into the terminology and framework? Do students in professional programs need the terminology in order to do the actual work of research? Perhaps, put more simply and to the point, should the RSD be a framework for instructors but not for students?

Three groups of students were involved in this survey research: students in ENGL 102, ENGL 218 and ENGL 407. First year students in ENGL 102 (Composition 2) develop a research paper throughout the semester. Upper-level students in ENGL 218 (Mass Communication) develop a research project throughout the semester. The instruction (both written and oral) discusses the projects using the term “research” repeatedly throughout the course materials.

Upper-level program students (Professional Communication and Emerging Media) in ENGL 407 (Seminar in Applied Journalism) research and write at least five journalism story assignments throughout the semester. The instruction (both written and oral) never uses the term “research” in the course materials.

At the midpoint in the semester I assessed students’ level of self-efficacy with aspects of the RSD framework with a survey. I then gave the same survey at the end of the semester. At that point also used an RSD-based assessment tool to evaluate students’ projects, papers and written journalistic stories.

I didn’t introduce or explain the RSD framework to any of my students. Instead I used the RSD to assess their level of research skills. After I received the first round of survey results at mid-semester I realized that the most interesting and relevant finding was how students were claiming high capability in research. This countered our anecdotal experiences with the type of research-related work the students tended to produce.
Student Surveys
23 students responded to the mid-semester surveys, with relatively equal numbers from the three courses. In that first survey, the majority indicated they were capable in most of the facets of research. That said, they were more divided when it came to wanting to know more about research. They also were divided in perceiving the relevance of research to their career paths.

11 students responded to the end of the semester surveys, and the upper level course had more student responses. At this point more students indicated more strongly that they were capable in most of the facets of research. Those who responded were also more interested in being involved in research in general and saw more relevance in how research was related to their future careers.

One of the survey elements seemed particularly relevant to the self-efficacy and actual skills obtained discrepancy I had noticed. In the first survey 82% of respondents said they agreed or strongly agreed with this statement “I can clearly communicate in conversation what I understand from my research in this course.” In the second survey, 64% or respondents had that type of agreement. Also, only 17% took the neutral stance (neither agree or disagree) in this second survey, where 36% had in the first survey. This could mean many things but one thought is that after they’d experienced a full research process they realized how complex it is. While they may have more experience with research and a better understanding of it, that doesn’t necessarily lead to engagement and efficacy.

Evaluating Student Work
When I used the RSD-based assessment tool to evaluate students’ projects, papers and written journalistic stories at the end of the semester, I decided to tally up how much of the work addressed the majority of the RSD facets (the vertical axis on the RSD chart).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># Research Facets Addressed in Work</th>
<th>ENGL 102</th>
<th>ENGL 218</th>
<th>ENGL 407</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5 Facets</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Facets</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Facets</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Facets</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I assumed that the students in the ENGL 102 and ENGL 218 courses were at a level 1 of student autonomy while the ENGL 407 students were at a level 2. I didn’t expect students to address all six research facets in their work and thus only tracked 5. I felt that the final
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facet (Students communicate knowledge and the processes used to generate it with an awareness of ethical, social and cultural issues), is important, but is too intertwined with writing skills abilities for me to parse out. Notice that I use the term “addressed.” It is intentional vague because as I used the assessment tool, I realized that using the RSD tool to assess rather than “grade” students’ work was a more nuanced process than I had anticipated. Thus, these tallies and this analysis are very preliminary and just scratch the surface.

Open-ended Responses

The parts of the survey that were most thought provoking were the open-ended response sections. One question asked: “What do you think research involves?” The responses were somewhat similar between the first and second survey and had some specific process focused responses (finding sources, gathering information, analyzing content, etc.) and also some intriguing responses (“I think research is the willingness to study a topic of your choice.”

The two questions that followed asked: “What has helped you to develop your research skills?” and “What has been a barrier to you developing your research skills?” In general the help was from an external support, campus resources, instructors, specific courses, and the barriers were internally based where something was lacking. Here are some of the things that were mentioned, lack of: drive, confidence, time, desire, interest, patience and discipline. This was interesting because it shows that we can have all the best databases and archives and instructors but it’s the engagement piece that is paramount, and perhaps the most complex.

These open-ended question responses have inspired me to continue exploring the question of “What does research mean to students?” What students are capable of and what they think they are capable of is always an intriguing question to me and I plan to continue to do similar surveys in upcoming semesters. In this next round of surveys I would like to obtain more responses and be able to do some analysis comparing the level of the students with the type of responses they give. Perhaps involved some focus groups as well.

In the fall and spring I’ll also be exploring a very specific aspect of research—developing a good research question—for another research project and I’m hoping to fold those findings into this work.

This experience working on this project and having these regular discussions with faculty and staff from across the campus has been extremely motivating. While I started the year thinking about approaching a particular aspect of research, I really became interested in
the complexity that surrounds the definition of “research.” This came to light in our community of practice discussions quite often and that led me to think about how our definitions are likely to inherently differ from our students’ definitions. Thus I felt the need to pull back and tackle this aspect first. What are the core values of research that students need to know? And do they need to call what they are doing “research” in order for it to have that value?