This is the second year this exploratory study which 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 two courses. One course was a representative sample of upper-level students within a specific program and area of professionalization. The second course was a representative sample of general upper-level students in an elective course.

I replicated the research (survey) work that I did in spring term 2015. As in the previous year, the project was inspired by many questions, especially, does it help or hurt students’ efficacy to call research, research? 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? In the first year of the study first-year students were part of the research. This year only students in a professional program were surveyed.

Two groups of students were involved in this survey research: students in ENGL 218 and ENGL 407. 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 planned to assess students’ level of self-efficacy with aspects of the RSD framework with a survey. Unfortunately, the response numbers were too low to attempt assessment. I gave the same survey at the end of the semester. This time I had a better response rate. At that point also had planned to use an RSD-based assessment tool to evaluate students’ projects, papers and written journalistic stories. Toward the end of the semester I decided to not implement this part of the project. The initial intention was to compare this year’s evaluations to the previous year’s evaluations. I realized that the delivery methods of the courses were not consistent. Last year ENGL 218 was an online course and this year it was a face-to-face course. I didn’t feel that the comparison would provide relevant or reliable findings.

Also, this year I didn’t introduce or explain the RSD framework to any of the students.
In The Name of Research: Implicit versus Explicit Articulation of Skills (Part Two)

Kate Edenborg

Student Surveys
As I mentioned the response rate to the mid-semester survey was low, so I focused my analysis on the semester-end survey responses. As I evaluated the information, I realized that the end of the semester was likely the better time to collect this information. Students are in a reflective mode as they wrap up projects, meaning they might be more likely to be contemplating what skills they’ll take away from the class.

14 students responded to the end of the semester surveys. Most students felt their research skills were good, in general (93 percent) and in the course (100 percent). They also felt confident in the processes of research but waivered a bit on the strength of their abilities with the following skills: organizing information from sources and analyzing information from sources.

The majority of students felt confident in their research skills, yet this didn’t translate into an interest in doing more research. Sixty-one percent indicated that they did not want to be more involved with research. Also, even though most of the students realized how research was relevant to their lives, potential careers and coursework, only 18 percent said they would like to work with a faculty member on an independent research study.

Another comparison merits mention here. Interestingly, this year’s group of students had confidence in their skills and an understanding of how relevant research was to many facets of their lives. The results from the 2015 survey indicated those students had less confidence and understanding. This might be an interesting correlation to explore in further research.

Open-ended Responses
Again, the open-ended responses provided some unexpected insights as well as some findings consistent with the 2015 responses. The items that students indicated as barriers to developing research skills were similar to those mentioned in previous term. Lack of interest and lack of time were the top factors. For example, one student wrote: “All research projects have been incredibly boring.” And another listed this as a barrier: “Having the time during the school year to do research thoroughly.” These were echoed not only by other student comments from this semester's survey, but also those from 2015.

One noted difference in responses this year, was that the items listed as supporting factors to developing research skills weren’t as fully focused on external factors. While campus resources (including instructors and librarians) were mentioned, some students also listed the growth of their own skills. One student said, “The more I do research the better my
research skills become.” And another simple said: “Practice.” A few students even gave a nod to their present course work, writing, “This class.” This prompts me to take a close look at how my instruction might have differed from the instruction in the previous year. I’ve learned more about student research skills, and it’s likely I’ve started to incorporate new methods of teaching those skills in my classrooms.

Overall, this year the students seemed to have a greater appreciation for research than those students surveyed in the previous year. They also seemed to better understand how research was incorporated in many of their college experiences and how significant a role research plays in many aspects of their lives.

This semester I had hoped to further probe the survey findings by coordinating student focus groups to explore the question of “What does research mean to you?” I also had hoped to do more of a examination comparing what students are capable of (using RSD assessment of an assignment) and what they think they are capable of (survey responses). Focus groups and RSD assessment of student work will be research tools I plan to incorporate in upcoming semesters.

So I come back to the questions that just might be at the heart of my project— “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?

Moving forward, I’d like to start to identify when it is effective to explicitly define research to our students and when it isn’t effective to be so explicit. During the past few years I’ve looked at two different classes, and in the next year I’d hope to compare two sections of the same class, one where I use the term “research” and one where I don’t. This also gives me guidance on whether or not I should incorporate the RSD framework into the classroom in an explicit way. If I find that being explicit with students about research processes helps them see the relevance of and engage with research, that could provide me with a new direction to take my instruction.

This semester I met with a smaller group of faculty that last year. While it was good to have independence with the project I’d developed, I felt that I might have benefited from connecting more with the faculty, especially those who were new to the RSD Community of Practice. (This is not a critique of the CoP leaders in the least. They tried.) During the 2015 CoP the interdisciplinary nature of the group provided me with new perspectives that enhanced the way I approached how thought about student research. It has also created a conversation amongst faculty about what research means at UW-Stout. I hope that continues with or without the RSD Community of Practice.