

Hitch-hikers, couch potatoes, you're fired! Teaching research methods through a group project

In this presentation I will share the benefits and challenges of teaching undergraduates research methods through the process of group research projects. Students in the Contemporary Music and Audio Production programmes must complete a research methods paper, 'GEN 200', in the second year of their degrees. Traditionally this paper included a final examination, however pass rates were low and an examination did not necessarily give all students the skills and confidence to carry out independent research projects in the third year of their degrees.

In 2017 the exam was replaced with a new assessment involving students working in small groups to design, carry out and write up a research project. Teaching of research concepts was carried out alongside group work, with students applying theoretical information straightaway to practical research steps. Students can often be ambivalent about group assessments that involve a shared grade. It was vital therefore to design the course to provide sufficient tutor support to ensure structured learning took place, while offering students a sense of self-determination in managing the process. Students developed formal team policies that required them explicitly to determine how they would manage group members who behaved as 'hitch-hikers' or 'couch potatoes', contributing little and yet expecting to share the final grade with their fellow, hard-working group members. Groups were able to 'fire' a consistently non-contributing group member, and students who felt they were doing all the work in a non-performing group had the option of 'resigning' and joining another group.

The process produced five good research projects, and also offered an exciting and challenging teaching experience. Student feedback shows that they feel more confident about beginning their own research next year, and that they would like the group process to begin earlier in the course.