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Reflective Essay

This course enlightened me to the process behind conducting research and the art of implementing raw data into writing while drawing on correlations and highlighting patterns. Throughout this class I have learned how to gather data through in-person interviews, census, and online data. In this time, I’ve found there are three main principles to follow when dealing with human subjects, numbers and data, and finding relevant previously-published work on the subject you are researching.

When using human subjects to collect data by conducting an interview there are many precautions to keep in mind before and during the interview process. The first factor to consider before the interview is your schedule and methods of communication. When you first choose your subject, or rather, meet your subject, pick a mode of communication that works for them. If it’s via email, make sure it’s through an address they regularly check. If it’s by telephone, make sure it’s a mobile phone that they can rely on. In addition to modes of communication, be respectful of your subject’s time. Email and call them during traditional work hours, this will show you are working on their schedule. It is important to prioritize their schedule so they don’t feel burdened by participating in your study. You want your subject to trust you and to trust your credibility. Therefore, being reliable and accommodating is key. If you both agree to a time and date, it is of most importance that you ensure you can arrive early and to the correct location. Also, never be nervous about approaching and speaking to your subject, so be sure to double check that the time works for them. On that note, work with their schedule. They are taking the time out of their life to participate in your research, so work on their time.

The biggest component of using human subjects is the actual interview. Once the time of the interview approaches, make sure all of your equipment is working and ready when the interviewee arrives. Always ask the subject’s permission to record and have them sign a release form for permission to use the information they present in your research. However, do not solely rely on the recording device, take notes during the interview just in case something should go wrong with the equipment. Also, it is helpful to take notes during the interview with time stamps tracking the progression of the conversation. While it is important to ask follow-up questions, it is more professional to be mindful of the interviewees time. Any follow-up questions can also be asked after the interview in a simple email or quick phone call.

Another method of research is conducted through the use of numerical data. When using numerical data in your research, finding credible websites and search engines is essential. Try to use well-known, or government websites that are regulated on a higher level. For my project, I used factfinder.census.gov and it had consistent and clear data. Related to the clarity of data is presentation. When taking the raw data and translating it into an eloquent essay that flows well, be sure to keep the reader in mind. Having visuals (e.g. charts, tables, and graphs) is a great guide for readers, but accompanying the visual elements with descriptive captions or paragraphs of explanation is vital for the reader’s understanding. Depending on the scale of the research, you will be left with a lot of raw data and as the researcher and writer, it is your duty to create a cohesive, well-supported argument based on the data you’ve gathered. However, not all of the data collected will be relevant or necessary to the reader’s understanding. So, it’s important to highlight the correlations between the data sets, showcase the patterns, and from this create your argument. It is also important to acknowledge the limitations and inconsistencies in your data. Not all of the data collected will support your specific argument, and that is acceptable. To show objectivity and build credibility, it’s important to show both sides of the research. That includes the data which supports your thesis and that which does not.

The third and final principle of research is familiarizing yourself with previously-published works in the field. To know which direction to take with your research project, understanding previous research in the subject area is vital. Reading these works will help to guide your project and aid you in choosing an angle that has not been explored before. The literature review section serves as an introduction of sorts to your readers, it shows what experts have said on this subject and how they used data to support their claims. In this section, you can show differing opinions or arguments in the field. It is acceptable to include sources whose arguments oppose the one you are trying to make. The intention of this section is to familiarize the reader with the subject area and the work that has been previously conducted and to contextualize the data and argument you are presenting.

Throughout this class, I was able to utilize all three of these research principles in my projects. In project one, I learned how to transform a conversation into a piece of history. I also learned how to incorporate dialogue into a well-articulated essay while using it to form an argument. In project two, I was able to dive into my project—or rather, hop on, in a literal sense. I turned an afternoon of bus hopping into a case for the improvement of mass public transportation in Detroit using the numerical data we collected. In my third project, I was able to form my own research project and contribute to a subject area I was previously interested in. Overall, this class exposed me to the various ways research can be collected and presented.