

# Teaching Research Methods to Social Work Students: A Transnational Critical Reflection

**Dr Nonie Harris,  
Professor Ilango Ponnuswami and  
Dr Desley Harvey**



**Research assistant Ms Aileen Sorohan  
developing the online *Teaching and Doing  
Research Survey***

# Today's Presentation

- Background and Context
- Why is this Topic Important?
- Teaching Research Methods – Issues and Dilemmas
- What Does the Literature Say?
- The Study
- What did we Learn?

# Background and Context

- Professor Ilango was a Cairns Institute Visiting Scholar at James Cook University (JCU) in 2012
- Dr Harris has taught research methods at JCU for 20 years
- They shared a mutual interest in teaching research methods to social work students
- Recognised that many challenges and dilemmas were relevant in both the Indian and Australian contexts and that a meaningful cross-national collaboration would potentially enrich the research learning experience of students in both locations



Sue McGinty, centre, Professor and Acting Director, The Cairns Institute, James Cook University, Townsville, Australia, having a word with P. Ilango, Professor and Head, Department of Social Work, Bharathidasan University

Photo courtesy of:  
<http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Tiruchirapalli/mental-health-of-children-ensures-overall-wellbeing-of-society/article4322820.ece>



- Further, Dr Desley Harvey, Senior Research Fellow with Queensland Health, recently contacted Dr Harris to discuss the possibilities of a collaboration around student perceptions of research
- Dr Harvey was interested in obtaining information about student understanding of research, new practitioner readiness for research and student perceptions of the role of research in practice.
- Valued the opportunity this research presents for greater collaboration between sectors (health and education as an example) as a way of building an evidence base for social work.

***Practitioner Research Capacity: A Survey of Social Workers in Northern Queensland (2013)***

***By Desley Harvey, David Plummer, Alison Pighills & Tilley Pain***

# Why is this Topic Important?\*

- The real purpose of **research in social work as an evidence-base for policy and practice decisions** begins to dawn in the minds of social workers after some experience in the field and after acquiring a broader and more inclusive world-view and understanding of the inter-connectedness of everything we do with some form of research activity, however rudimentary that might be.
- Unlike teaching social work methods, **teaching of research methodology to social work students has been rather difficult and challenging** because of the apprehensions in the minds of both the teacher and the taught.
- \* *Reflections from Professor Ilango*

# Social Work Practice Standards

- The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) Practice Standards particularly address the need for research:

Research is key to the continued development of the theory and knowledge base of social work practice. Research is a key area of social work practice and is one of the six objectives included in the AASW Practice Standards for Social Workers which identifies that “client needs, organizational goals and social policy are addressed through the application of the social worker’s values, knowledge and **skills in the research process**” (AASW, 2010, p. 6).





# Teaching Research Methods – Issues and Dilemmas

- A pronounced **separation of teaching and research in Indian Higher Education**. Cutting edge and world class research does take place in Indian research institutions as well as the central universities and is supported centrally by the government. It also happens in the university departments of some state universities (where graduate students have historically been taught), but the research process is far removed from the teaching of undergraduates...
- **In Australia research methods are a mandatory part** of the social work curriculum and many students approach their research subjects with **trepidation and reluctance** (Fook, 2003; Harder, 2012). Harvey, Plummer, Pighills and Pain (2013) in their recent study supported this assertion and “identified **research anxiety and research avoidance** as significant challenges for research capacity building”.

# What Does the Literature Say?

- **Research and Social Work**

- “Practitioner research is potentially the most useful and relevant source of **new knowledge** for social work and service innovations” (Harvey, Plummer, Pighills and Pain, 2013, p. 2).
- Respondents in Beddoe’s (2011) qualitative study indicated that they saw the **importance of research** informed practice, but they **lacked confidence** in undertaking research themselves – vital to the ongoing **professionalisation of social work**.
- Srinivasa Murthy (2011) specifically acknowledges the contribution of research to our understanding of mental disorders and notes that: ‘This new knowledge has continuously **supported the development of mental health programs**’ (p. 104).
- In the health sector – “Given the rise of evidence based practice, there are potentially serious implications for social work in terms of **how it positions itself as a contributor to new knowledge within health**” (Brough, Wagner & Farrell, 2013, p. 1).

- **Measuring Good Teaching Practice (literature examples)**

- Measuring Student's Perceptions of Teaching: Dimensions of Evaluation (1986), Burdell and Bardo;
- Conceptualising and measuring student engagement through the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE): a critique (2011) Hagel, Carr & Devlin;
- The development and validation of a knowledge, attitude and behaviour questionnaire to assess undergraduate evidence-based practice teaching and learning (2003) Johnston, Leung, Fielding, Tin & Ho
- Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education  
By Chickering and Gamson



# The Study

- **Title: Teaching Research Methods to Social Work Students**
- **Aims:**
  - To gather data from social work students in Australia and India in order to seek students' reflections on the experience of studying research, how prepared they feel they are to be practitioner researchers.
  - To ascertain students' views on how the teaching process may be improved.
  - To use the research data to inform the development of strategies for improving the quality of research methodology teaching and learning, and enhancing readiness for practice based research.

- **Methodology**
- This research project used a quantitative methodology and data was gathered by questionnaire. The questionnaire was created **online\*** using SurveyGizmo and included questions on social work students' experiences of studying research methods, readiness to use research in practice and their recommendations on how the teaching of research methods could be improved.

**\* McGinty, Koo & Saeidi (2010) A Cross-Country Study on Research Student's Perceptions of the Role of Supervision and Cultural Knowledge in Thesis Development**

#### INFORMATION SHEET

##### PROJECT TITLE: Teaching Social Work Research

You are invited to take part in a research project that seeks social work students' reflections on the experience of studying research within their degree, how prepared they feel they are to be practitioner researchers and, also, to ascertain their views on how the research teaching process may be improved. The study is being conducted by Dr Nonie Harris, Professor Ilango Ponnuswami and Dr Desley Harvey, and will contribute to research methodology teaching and learning in the Bachelor of Social Work and Master of Social Work at James Cook University and Bharathidasan University.

If you agree to be involved in the study, you will be invited to complete an online questionnaire. The questionnaire that you may complete, asks you about your experiences of studying research methods, readiness to use research in practice and your recommendations on how the teaching of research methods could be improved. The questionnaire should only take 15 minutes to complete.

Taking part in this study is completely voluntary and you can stop taking part in the study at any time without explanation or prejudice. Further you can choose not to answer specific questions within the questionnaire itself.

Your responses will be strictly confidential. No individual can be identified from the questionnaire that they have completed. The data from the study will be used in research publications and conference presentations. You will not be identified in any way in these publications.

If you consent to participating in this survey please click the button below labelled 'I agree to continue'. If you do not consent to participate in this study please click the button below labelled 'I wish to exit'.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact Dr Nonie Harris (Australia) or Professor Ilango Ponnuswami (India).

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*If you have any concerns regarding the ethical conduct of the study, please contact:*  
Human Ethics, Research Office  
James Cook University, Townsville, Qld, 4811  
Phone: (07) 4781 5011 (ethics@jcu.edu.au)

# THE SURVEY

## Teaching and Doing Research

### Teaching & Doing Research Survey

New Page

3. Please tell us whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.  
Use the scale provided (Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly agree) and choose one answer for each statement.

Teaching staff encouraged students to voice any concerns they might have.

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Agree      Strongly agree

☐      ☐      ☐      ☐

Teaching staff encouraged contact with students during their office consultation times.

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Agree      Strongly agree

☐      ☐      ☐      ☐

Teaching staff were accessible to students.

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Agree      Strongly agree

☐      ☐      ☐      ☐

### Teaching & Doing Research Survey

New Page

4. What is your gender?

- ☐ Female  
☐ Male

5. How old are you?

6. What mode of study were you enrolled in for this course?

- ☐ Internal  
☐ External (Distance Education)

7. What course are you enrolled in?

- ☐ Bachelor of Social Work  
☐ Masters of Social Work  
☐ Other (please specify)

### Teaching & Doing Research Survey

Page One

1. Please tell us how confident you are that you would be able to complete the following research tasks.

Answer using the following scale:

Not confident; A little confident; Confident; Very confident

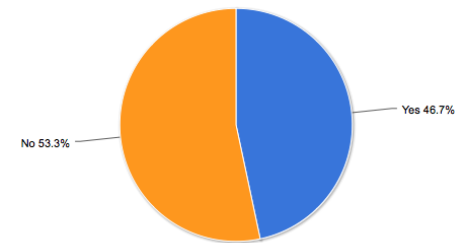
Choose one answer for each task on the list below.

	Not confident	A little confident	Confident	Very confident
Generate research ideas	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Formulate a research question	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Find relevant literature	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Critically review the literature	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Write a research proposal	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Apply for research funding	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Use qualitative research methods	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Use quantitative research methods	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Analyse qualitative data	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

# What did we Learn?

- **Population:** 80 final year BSW and MSW students from JCU, Australia
- **Sample:** 15 (18.75%) as at 1/11/13
- **Gender:** Female 13, Male 2
- **Age Range:** 22-56, Mean = 31.46
- **Study Mode:** External 53%, Internal 47%
- Studied more than one research subject: 96%

10. Have you been involved as a researcher in any research projects?



10. Have you been involved as a researcher in any research projects?

Value	Count	Percent %	Statistics
Yes	7	46.7%	Total Responses 15
No	8	53.3%	

11. If your answer to Question 10 was NO, then press the SUBMIT button below. If your answer to Question 10 was YES, then describe the research project(s) in which you have been involved before pressing the Submit button.

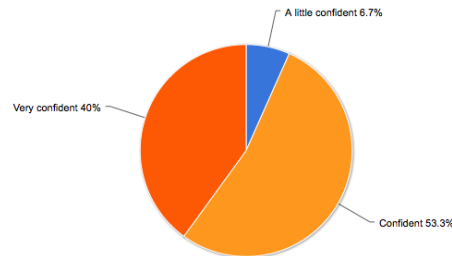
Count	Response
1	For honors prep I was involved in writing a report
1	Hons research study - Qualitative
1	I am currently undertaking my honours thesis.
1	Qualitative Honours research in Undergraduate degree
1	clinical medical research

# Research Confidence Level

- **Highest Confidence Levels:**

- Finding relevant literature
- Writing a research proposal
- Formulating a research question
- Use of qualitative methods
- Writing a research report

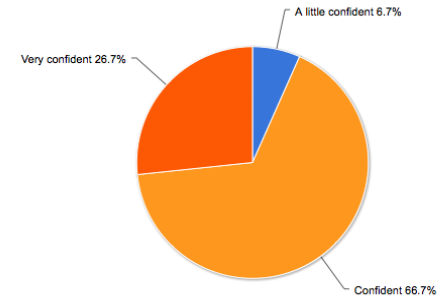
Use qualitative research methods.



Use qualitative research methods.

Value	Count	Percent %	Statistics	
Not Confident	0	0.0%	Total Responses	15
A little confident	1	6.7%	Sum	50.0
Confident	8	53.3%	Avg.	3.3
Very confident	6	40.0%	StdDev	0.6
			Max	4.0

Formulate a research question.

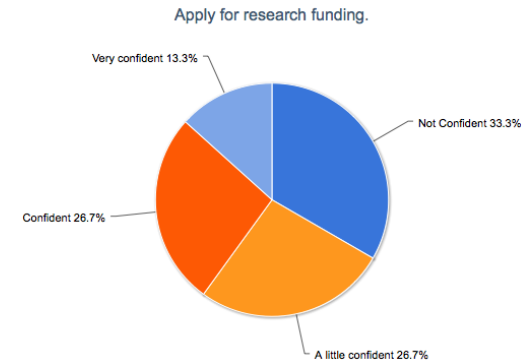


Formulate a research question.

Value	Count	Percent %	Statistics	
Not Confident	0	0.0%	Total Responses	15
A little confident	1	6.7%	Sum	48.0
Confident	10	66.7%	Avg.	3.2
Very confident	4	26.7%	StdDev	0.5
			Max	4.0

# Research Confidence Level

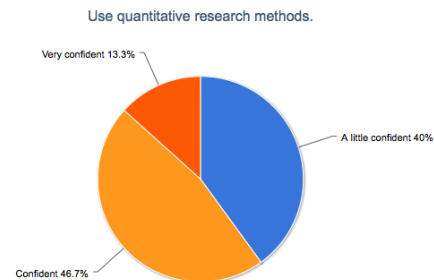
- **Lowest Confidence Levels:**
  - Applying for research funding
  - Use of quantitative methods
  - Interpreting quantitative results



Apply for research funding.

Value	Count	Percent %
Not Confident	5	33.3%
A little confident	4	26.7%
Confident	4	26.7%
Very confident	2	13.3%

Statistics	
Total Responses	15
Sum	33.0
Avg.	2.2
StdDev	1.0
Max	4.0




Use quantitative research methods.

Value	Count	Percent %
Not Confident	0	0.0%
A little confident	6	40.0%
Confident	7	46.7%
Very confident	2	13.3%

Statistics	
Total Responses	15
Sum	41.0
Avg.	2.7
StdDev	0.7
Max	4.0





Tell us how you believe you will be able to use the research skills that you have learned during your time at university when you are in professional practice

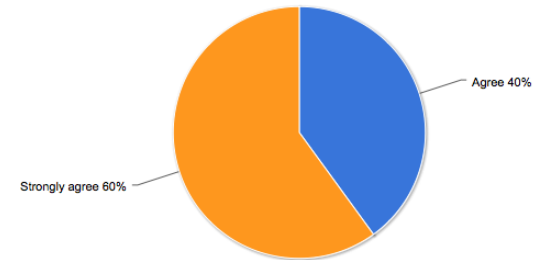
- **Quotes from students:**

- Gathering information on cases and presenting it to colleagues.
- Identify gaps in service provision.
- I was asked by the CEO of my organisation to analyse data and put together graphs based on the data, and I was able to do so!
- A baseline ability to develop.
- In all fields of social work research is required.
- I would use research skills to: understand prevailing ideology; service user perspectives; to help develop strategies to respond to service user needs more effectively; learn from others experiences; minimize errors of personal experience and advance professional knowledge to suit the changing context of practice.
- I would like to conduct more research in my work to show it's efficacy and look forward to doing this in the future now that I have the knowledge and confidence to do it.

# The following teaching skills were most valued\*

- Availability of the lecturer to answer questions
- Classes were well organised and lecturer well prepared
- Enthusiastic staff
- Staff were accessible, helpful and caring
- Linking learning to previously learned skills and expanding on them
- Real examples to back up theory
- \*from quantitative and qualitative data

Teaching staff were enthusiastic about their subject.



Teaching staff were enthusiastic about their subject.

Value	Count	Percent %
Strongly disagree	0	0.0%
Disagree	0	0.0%
Agree	6	40.0%
Strongly agree	9	60.0%

Statistics	
Total Responses	15
Sum	54.0
Avg.	3.6
StdDev	0.5
Max	4.0

# Final thoughts

- The very beginning of this research investigation – with much promise as it expands internationally (the challenges of international research collaborations)
- The Social Work Degree can offer a sound basis for research skill development (high confidence levels across a range of research skills)
- Students can articulate how research can be part of their future practice
- Students can identify teaching practices that make a difference to their research learning
- Accessible, enthusiastic, knowledgeable and well organised research teachers make a difference!