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# Notes from the Classroom

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## Reimagining Research Design Instruction: Student and Teacher Reflections on the Reverse Research Design

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This piece is a follow-up on a pedagogical exercise called the “reverse research design” (Ayoub 2022).<sup>1</sup> As a teaching tool, the reverse research design involves students stepping into the shoes of a published author and transporting themselves back in

time to craft a grant proposal for an already-concluded study. This hands-on exercise guides them through the intricacies of research design while temporarily easing the anxiety of formulating their own research question and project. At the request of the QMMR editors, we

<sup>1</sup> We summarize the assignment and parts of the argument based on the Ayoub (2022) study, which we recommend being read in conjunction with this follow-up piece.

restate the goals of the original exercise but also build upon it by developing additional strategies for productive use in the classroom. To that end, it is vital to incorporate student viewpoints and feedback, which we do below by uniting the perspective of a student (Duckworth) and an instructor (Ayoub). Our endeavor is thus to offer a more personal reflection about our experiences with this activity, coupled with a discussion of wider student feedback.

We begin first by summarizing the nuts and bolts of the reverse research design assignment, followed by a reflection from the classroom on how to implement it effectively. This section incorporates a student and instructor perspective. Finally, we analyze student evaluation feedback to offer some descriptive evidence of the assignment's utility in sharpening students' analytical skills for social science research.

### **Summary of the "Reverse Research Design"**

In brief, the reverse research design serves as a bridge, effectively combining two key expectations placed on students within the academic setting: first, the requirement to read and critically engage with the works of established scholars, and second, the need to develop their own research skills. While we often teach these expectations separately, the reverse research design directly deploys one expectation to build on the other. This section explains the concept of reverse research design and provides a brief summary of the teaching resources and methodologies employed for its implementation.

The reverse research design involves students retracing the research process of a published author by imagining themselves as the author writing a grant proposal for the study. A key element of this exercise, also discussed from the student perspective below, is that it allows students to work through the steps of research design without the pressure of formulating their own research question and project. The teaching tool includes three steps to teaching research design. Step 1 begins with the instructor introducing the core components and purposes of research design. Step 2 is the reverse research design assignment itself, where students create their own research proposal based on an existing work. Step 3 involves an original research design assignment, where students formulate their own research question and proposal.

The crucial bridging step here is Step 2, where students work with a book or article they have become familiar with in the course (from the course outline),

identifying the strategies the author employed to create a finished work.<sup>2</sup> Familiarity with the book or article reduces students' anxiety about designing their own research projects and allows them to creatively explore the author's profile and experiences during the research process. In the assignment, students envision themselves as the author at the initial research design stage. They write a grant proposal to a foundation seeking funding for the research that led to the published book or article. The proposal should include a research design outlining the project in the student's own words, with some creative freedom allowed, as they do not know all elements of the author's process. The components of the research design they are asked to identify and address include the puzzle, research question, and argument; data collection and methodology; feasibility (here students also research the author's language skills or methods training from their CVs); and significance of the project. Ideally, most of these elements (especially the first three) should be explicit in the original article or book. This exercise becomes useful for understanding the writing process, comprehending the assigned readings by carefully dissecting them, and preparing for future research projects of their own. To that end, the exercise can also be assigned in the form of a Fulbright Grant proposal if the instructor wishes. This helps students imagine themselves applying for actual grants, simultaneously demystifying that process and increasing the odds that they will submit such grant applications of their own (see below). A full breakdown of the steps and an example of the assignment handout can be found in Ayoub (2022).

The task can also be implemented individually or as a group assignment. While there is some benefit to grading if students work on the assignment on their own at home (as it demonstrates their degree of engagement with the course material and places them in the driver's seat at the outset) it has also worked well as a group assignment. In some years, Ayoub assigned it in teams of four students, where they started the project in class and worked on it for a week outside of class. This can be more manageable for instructors who have a packed syllabus already and lack the time to incorporate it as a separate individual assignment, or for instructors in large courses where the grading lift of individual assignments would be too high. In the group version, teams produce the grant proposal together, which lowers the output of the additional grading material when working this assignment into a syllabus. For Duckworth, working in groups was very effective. She found it helpful to talk through the elements of the research design with peers, dissecting the project together. Of course, one downside

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<sup>2</sup> Usually, all students work with the same text (one the instructor has vetted to ensure it has a clearly explained methodological approach) so they can compare their research design after. That said, some instructors may allow students to select any piece from the course outline.

of the group setting may be that it diminishes the effect of fully embodying the author oneself and, as with any group task, there remains a risk of a few students dominating—creating a setting where marginalized students remain marginalized.

In sum, we hope the tool addresses some of the challenges of teaching research design in undergraduate social science courses by proposing a pedagogical tool to bridge the gap between reading established scholars' work and students conducting their own research. Importantly, this small assignment also helps address the importance of teaching research design, despite the challenges of doing so. As we build upon below, instructors—who typically have been working with the research process for many years—often forget the felt intimidation that “doing one's own research” provokes in a student. Also, the pressure of coming up with one's own exciting and “uncharted” question is a real handicap to beginning a project. By having those elements provided by a published author (i.e., removing some of the mental impediments to getting going) students can work through the process initially. Later, having completed reverse research design on paper, they feel much more confident in wearing the hat of the researcher themselves.

### **Why and How It Matters: A Student Reflection on Implementation**

The process of moving from intimidation to confidence while undergoing this task is described by many students, including one of the authors here. To be sure, a primary goal of this assignment is to demystify the daunting process of research design. While undergraduate institutions advertise their numerous opportunities for student research, many students of the social sciences—particularly students who are historically marginalized—view the research process as unfamiliar, intimidating, or exclusive to science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields (Ayoub and Rose 2016). This was certainly the case for Duckworth, who was completely unfamiliar with the research process when she entered Occidental College as an undergraduate. At small liberal arts colleges, where research methods courses are not always required in social science departments, students may advance into upper-level courses without ever being introduced to the process of research. This is also true of many departmental curricula in many larger universities. Duckworth herself experienced this at Occidental, where her first course dealing with research design or method was Ayoub's Comparative Social Movements seminar, which she took in her third year. Indeed, Ayoub's use of the reverse research design in many topical courses (like the one on social movements) was informed by the fact that there was little opportunity at the college

for students to hone their own research skills before dropping them into the deep end of the pool during their senior comprehensive project at the end of their senior year. Many students felt more needed to be done, and the department had few resources and no tradition of teaching methods until recently (a 2-credit methods course is now offered, though not required, as part of the major curriculum).

The reverse research design assignment thus offers an entry point for students in Duckworth's position who are new to research, lack confidence in their ability to conduct research, and are unsure of where to start. The exercise feels manageable and requires little external preparation, as students are already familiar with the material they use for the assignment and can simply work backward to break down its methodological components. This eliminates the especially daunting task of identifying a puzzle and generating one's own original research question, which Duckworth and many of her peers found to be the biggest challenge as undergraduate researchers. The pressure of devising a research question that “had never been studied before” to solve a puzzle that “had never been answered before” felt paralyzing (and somewhat ridiculous) to Duckworth. Even though her instructor insisted that research questions are rarely fully untapped and expressed skepticism about the hunt by undergraduates for true “gaps in the literature,” students still felt that pressure. Duckworth would ask herself: How could I possibly come up with something new that no researcher has ever thought of before? What makes me qualified to contribute to a conversation between experts who have dedicated their careers to this topic? The reverse research design assuages these concerns—or at least defers them until later in the process, when students feel more confident in their skills and have a more realistic understanding of what is expected of undergraduate researchers (e.g., by charting the years-long process of published work).

After completing the reverse research design assignment, Duckworth felt more empowered to begin an original research design than she did in other research-based undergraduate courses. In fact, she later took a similar upper-level research course that did not use this intermediary assignment during the research process, and she noticed herself and her fellow students struggling considerably more. Many students in that course were able to identify a topic they were passionate about but found it difficult to translate it into a specific and original research question, defaulting instead to vague and exploratory questions. Further, without reading course materials with a specific attention to methodology, students had a weaker grasp of how to craft a research question and puzzle and what the different elements

of a research design were. Their doubts about their own ability to contribute something meaningful to the literature remained paramount. Duckworth herself spent many hours sifting through literature that had not been assigned in class in order to develop an original research question and puzzle, creating significant extra work and anxiety about the research process. The reverse research design mitigates many of these roadblocks by utilizing familiar literature, teaching students to analyze texts specifically for their methodologies, and breaking down the research process into digestible segments that students can then apply to their own work.

### **Seeing Oneself as a Researcher**

By following an author's biography (in the social movements course, some students write about the author's experiences in activism, or discover that they were first-generation students, etc.) the roadblocks start to chip away for many students. To that end, because a primary goal of this assignment is to demystify the research design process for students who may feel alien to research, we especially recommend using work written by scholars who are themselves underrepresented in the field. Work by scholars who address their status as first-generation scholars, or scholars of color, or scholars marginalized in fields where their abilities, gender, or sexuality are underrepresented can be empowering. In the year of Duckworth's class, we worked with a book by Chris Zepeda Millán (2017) called *Latino Mass Mobilization*. The book was directly related to the course material, dealing with many of the theories of social movements we had been studying, but it was also useful for the discussion of Zepeda Millán's positionality. In the appendix, he discusses his experiences as a first-generation scholar of color in political science at great length, describing both the challenges and hidden benefits of that role. In particular, Zepeda Millán discusses how his own Latino identity and his connection to immigrant communities should be viewed not as a conflict of interest or a threat to "objectivity," but instead as an asset that grants him privileged access to and credibility among the activists and organizers he interviewed for his book. Further, he argues that his personal investment in the success of the immigrant rights movement motivates him to be a more thorough and accurate researcher, in order to generate meaningful results that can be useful to both scholars

and the communities he studies. Given that our course took place in Los Angeles, this element of the exercise had a powerful resonance within debates in which many students were engaged in their everyday lives and conversations.

For Duckworth, this perspective helped address some of the impostor syndrome she felt as a woman of color in higher education. As a scholar-activist herself who was highly involved in movements for racial and gender justice, she appreciated the idea that research need not be apolitical, realizing that her identity and activist background could actually strengthen her research capabilities. Thus, Zepeda-Millán's approach not only carves out space for marginalized scholars to contribute to a white and male-dominated domain, it also illuminates how one's marginalized identity and existing set of experiences can actually be powerful assets in the research process. This perspective increased students' confidence and enhanced their methodological framework by combining research design with feminist and queer methods. In the assignment, because they pretended to be the author, many students—including first-generation and marginalized students—were able to identify with Zepeda-Millán and see themselves in his research, which made playing the role of a "scholar" more transformative. Ultimately, when this assignment uses the work of marginalized scholars, it functions not only as a pedagogical tool but also as a vehicle to foster greater belonging for marginalized students in academia.<sup>3</sup>

### **Overview of Student Feedback**

This final section provides some descriptive evidence of the assignment's effectiveness in improving students' understanding of research methodology and independent inquiry. Table 1 shows the mean scores of the four relevant questions from student evaluations in two courses that used the reverse research design assignment at Occidental College.<sup>4</sup> While the two courses make a small sample of descriptive data from which we should interpret cautiously, they do suggest that the assignment resonated well with students. In both courses, a majority of students either agreed or strongly agreed that the course improved their ability to analyze and synthesize information, write clearly and effectively, read critically and analytically, and think critically and

3 Of course, this will depend on the topics of the course, but other books and articles by marginalized scholars I have used include those by Tina Fetner (2008), Brian Harrison and Melissa Michelson (2017), Rupp and Taylor (2003) and Phillip Ayoub (2016, 2014).

4 The pattern was largely the same when it was implemented at Drexel University and Cornell University. We do not include those evaluations here because the survey questions were different. This assignment was also taught a third time at Occidental College in spring 2020, where quantitative evaluations were canceled by the college due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, we also compared the data on these four analytical questions to other courses Ayoub taught without assigning the 'reverse research design' at Occidental College. Holding constant the instructor (but not the course), we notice a systematic difference in the question of student self-assessment of their "analytical skills" between courses that used the 'reverse research design' assignment and those that did not.

analytically. Across all four questions, the mean score was above 6.00, on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), and consistently above the college and departmental averages.<sup>5</sup> Such outcomes were similarly reflected in students’ qualitative comments, where many noted improvements in their writing skills and highlighted the utility of the course in preparing them for future research. One student wrote, “I learned how to effectively write a research design, synthesizing previous literature and theory and effectively building my own research proposal. This greatly strengthened my ability to write concisely and clearly with the goal of proposing a research project, which I can use for future opportunities.” Several students similarly noted how the methodological training from the course had equipped them well to begin their senior comprehensive research project, and some wrote that they intended to use their research design from the course to apply for a Fulbright. “I am planning to use my work in this class to apply for a Fulbright,” wrote one student. Another said, “This course taught me how to write a research design and create a Fulbright application. These are two skills I didn’t previously have, but I’m so thankful that I have them now!”

Along with highlighting improved writing and research abilities, several students commented on the course’s gradual pacing of the research process, which eased their stress and made their own research design feel more manageable. One student wrote, “Because we spent more time truly understanding what social movement research papers are supposed to look like (through Zepeda-Millan and Prof. Ayoub’s own book[s]), writing the final paper was much easier than I had originally anticipated.” Another reflected, “the pacing of the research proposal was very effective, [and] I really appreciated how we gradually edited our work throughout the semester. It made the assignment much more manageable and strengthened my writing.” Thus, students appreciated intermediary assignments like the reverse research design, which gave them ample time to deconstruct the research process and empowered them to begin their own project. Many also noted how their own research plans for the major had been strengthened. For example, one said they “feel more than prepared to take on the senior seminar and my final year in the major,” and another noted that they now had the “tools

to launch [their] senior comprehensive projects, which [they are] very grateful for.”

Table 1: Summary of Student Evaluations

Note: Mean scores are reported, Scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)

	Spring 2019	Fall 2021
This course improved my ability to analyze, synthesize, and/or apply information regarding the subject	6.86	6.86
This course increased my knowledge, skills, and/or personal development in the following areas: <b>writing clearly and effectively</b>	6.75	6.46
This course increased my knowledge, skills, and/or personal development in the following areas: <b>reading critically and analytically</b>	6.88	6.07
This course increased my knowledge, skills, and/or personal development in the following areas: <b>thinking critically and analytically</b>	7.00	6.29

Finally, several student evaluations mentioned how the course had inspired passion and confidence in their abilities as researchers. One student wrote that the course “inspired [them] to try and consider doing research in the future,” and another reflected, “I have always been insecure about my writing, but the amount of time we have had in class to discuss our [draft] papers has been tremendously helpful for myself and my peers.”<sup>6</sup> Several highlighted its practical utility, calling it “super practical” in a way that “will help me well beyond the class setting,

5 We opted to report the mean scores. Median scores were consistently higher.

6 To circle back to the above, the reverse research design is a preliminary task that kickstarts the writing process for students’ own research design papers, referenced in a student’s quote here. After the reverse research design assignment is complete, students then work incrementally to draft each section of their own research design (i.e., research question, methodology, feasibility, etc.) throughout the remainder of the course, which they eventually submit as the final paper for the course. Over the course of several weeks, they participate in periodic peer review sessions during class, receiving feedback on each new section of their research design. This intentionally gradual process, which begins with the reverse research design, has been appreciated by many students.

leaving me with a lot of good skills I can later use in my college career and beyond.” One commented, “I believe the content of this course will significantly impact my future career and involvement.” Students thus not only improved their analytical abilities, writing, reading, and critical thinking skills, they also began to view themselves as more capable researchers, increasing both their confidence and excitement about participating in research in the future.

### Conclusion

Our hope is that this joint student and instructor reflection offers fresh ideas for how to implement the reverse research design. We have presented a summary of the assignment as a complement to the Ayoub (2022) article, followed by a first-hand reflection on our experiences both implementing it and undertaking it in the classroom. As a pedagogical approach, we find the reverse research design to accomplish multiple learning outcomes, including facilitating the understanding of course material, introducing the logic underlying research

design, fostering adeptness in reading and comprehending social science literature, and inspiring independent inquiry among students. Finally, we have offered some anecdotal descriptive evidence from students about how the assignment teaches them both a topical area and research design methods, while building their confidence as independent researchers. Students consistently laud it as fundamental preparation for their subsequent comprehensive thesis writing, grant applications, and comprehension of social science literature. In sum, our experience with the assignment—and that of colleagues that have implemented it—suggests it is a simple but effective tool and its implementation has yielded successes. Despite its apparent simplicity, the exercise confers benefits to students, enhancing their ability to conduct research meaningfully. By equipping students with the skills necessary to formulate and address novel questions, we can contribute to their academic growth and potential.

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