The integration of research methodology with the undergraduate learning experience is a highly undervalued tool. As an undergraduate student, it is important to realize this opportunity and take advantage of it. Research methodology can aid in the fulfillment of your learning needs, as well as serve as a method of gaining confidence in your learning ability. Undergraduate research involvement will also prove to be very beneficial in your preparation for graduate school, or for attaining skills that are essential in the work place.

Getting Started

It may be true, as has been suggested, that a facilitator’s role is to help develop a climate of trust so that it is possible to risk and develop personal interests and opinions in regards to learning (Barkham & Elender, 1995). However, the student must also show initiative in order to take advantage of the learning opportunities that research design and methodology provide. It has been my experience as an undergraduate that an important factor which seems to prevent undergraduate students from taking advantage of research opportunities is their feelings of intimidation.

In other words, many undergraduates simply do not feel comfortable in approaching their professors, and asking to be involved in their research. It is important to keep in mind, as an undergraduate student, that your professors have been in your shoes! Further, it is likely that they will be more than happy to accommodate your needs. However, if you are denied by a particular professor, do not be afraid to approach another professor regarding research opportunities. Chances are, you will find a faculty member who will let you in the door of research opportunity.

Once you have made the decision to get involved with research, start early! The research process is very dynamic, and requires time to grasp the concepts behind the scientific method. In addition to comprehending the fundamentals of research methods, the development of specific hypotheses, the testing of these hypotheses, and the interpretation of the data all require time and effort to insure reliability and validity of the results.

Additionally, one must keep in mind the possibility of publications and conference presentations, which will often require more time and effort than the actual research itself. By getting involved with research early in your undergraduate career, not only will you allow yourself the time necessary to conceptualize the components of research methods, you will allow yourself enough time to possibly publish or present your research.
The Experience

When you receive the opportunity to become an undergraduate research assistant, it is vital that you remain focused and take advantage of the experience. You should consider your position a privilege, and treat it as such. It is important to remember that many students may want to be in your position, but might not feel comfortable in approaching faculty about research opportunities. It is also very important to be responsible, and conduct yourself with a sense of professionalism. You will find learning to be an interesting process; this is usually the direct result of the interaction between you and your research supervisor (Kaplan & Kies, 1995).

Perhaps even more importantly, you can start to develop your own theories and hypotheses, methods of testing those hypotheses, and begin to discuss them with your research supervisor during the research experience. By utilizing the research experience as a method of developing new hypotheses, it not only shows your research supervisor that you are goal-oriented, it shows that your thinking process is generative, creative, and proactive, not just reactive (Bandura, 1999).

The Benefits

The ability to look for clues in texts, the ability to single out the points of most relevance, the ability to notice things—these are skills that undergraduates need to be successful academically, and these are all features that accompany research design and methodology (Long, 1994). With active participation in research, you will have the opportunity to enhance your ability to assimilate and utilize content in the classroom.

Many graduate programs look for undergraduates who actively participate in the field of psychology (Samonds, 1999). Many graduate programs may not only require that you have research experience, they may also prefer recommendation letters from faculty members who have first-hand knowledge of your ability and who can testify to your overall potential for graduate study (Samonds, 1999). What better way to kill two birds with one stone? Undergraduate research experience will not only indicate to graduate schools that you have a high level of interest in the field of psychology, it will also provide a faculty member with a genuine opportunity to get to know you on a personal level. This will often provide for an exceptional recommendation letter, thus increasing your chances for graduate school admission.

Do not despair! It is also okay if you decide to take some time off before applying to graduate school; some schools prefer applicants with experience outside undergraduate life. However, this does not mean that it is advisable to be idle for this time; if you have the opportunity, continue to be involved with research, and at the very least, stay in touch with your undergraduate research supervisor. If you choose not to go to graduate school and prefer to join the work force, previous undergraduate research experience can benefit you, as well. The components of proper research design and methodology demand that the researcher be 1) creative, 2) committed, and 3) consistent. As you can imagine, these are obviously some of the qualities that employers seek in their employees.
Conclusion

Even though research may focus on a particular area, it extends beyond that particular
summit. As an undergraduate, it is a tool that should be utilized at an early stage in your
academic experience. Research methodology promotes critical thinking, creative reasoning, and
an appreciation of the importance of scientific knowledge (Smith, 1999). It will not only enable
you to acquire enthusiastically and effectively research knowledge, it will also provide you with
a wide range of transferable skills that will prepare you for graduate study, or for the career of
your choice.

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