

Maintaining Student Focus: Research on COVID-19

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The following describes an assignment from a research methods course created in response to upheavals and opportunities presented by COVID-19. During the final weeks of class, fifty-eight undergraduate sociology majors attending MacEwan University in Edmonton, Alberta, were expected to design and carry out a content analysis aimed at describing key ideas contained in social media forums or in public posts to controversial news stories. Although students had settled on a range of topics such as responses to Internet influencers, public opinions towards police use of facial-recognition software, and Indigenous Peoples' views on the importance of traditional practices, they were also regularly discussing amongst themselves the potential dangers posed by the novel coronavirus. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic, putting to rest skepticism about how far-reaching the implications might be. On March 12, the students wrote their second midterm, and on March 14, they learned that classes were canceled indefinitely, but they could still complete their courses remotely.

Alongside the option to pursue their earlier topic, the professor (first author) made available an opportunity to learn more about the all-encompassing events unfolding as a result of COVID-19 through a social lens. The revamped project unfolded in two parts: Part A became a short literature review assignment asking students to engage with previous research to help them frame their own interests into a research question. To facilitate this process, the sociology subject librarian (second author) created an [online course guide](#) using Springshare LibGuides software that replaced a previously planned in-person information literacy session. The guide included tips, strategies, and short videos from [NC State University Libraries](#), and walked students through the process of locating, evaluating, and engaging with relevant literature to help inform social research exploring a current event. After working through the steps laid out in the guide, students completed reports that explained how their study would build upon at least two peer-reviewed research studies to answer their own research question.

This first part of the assignment conceptualized and introduced the students' proposed projects which then allowed the professor to interject with individual help, feedback and guidance on the most appropriate design and data sources for answering the formulated questions. Part B entailed designing the study, carrying out the research, and writing up the formal report. Students were directed to an appropriate source such as comments at the bottom of

a recent online news article on their area of interest. Students then carried out an analysis of recent posts and summarized the findings in a formal report. Guidelines were provided for what to include in each section. For example, students were prompted under the method section to describe the sample that formed the basis of their study, to describe how the sample was selected (e.g. which comments they included), to describe any relevant inclusion or exclusion criteria, and to describe the procedure followed to code at least 50 posts.

While slightly pared down from what one might expect under other circumstances, students deeply reflected on COVID-19 relative to social research focused on other pandemics such as SARS and HINI, and proposed projects that resonated with them during this crisis. For example, some students decided to focus on racist comments towards the Asian community in response to Tweets originating with Donald Trump. Others identified themes in news headlines about COVID-19 to see how different media outlets framed the pandemic. A few also looked at public responses to news stories involving COVID-19 to see how the medical community, politicians, and/or the general public were responding to the pandemic evolving before them. Against the backdrop of a global crisis, students were presented with an opportunity to focus their attentions in a critical and productive manner, gaining deeper insights and perspectives into events unfolding around them while also learning how to conduct basic social research and better understand its important role in interpreting and understanding the world around us. As one of the students put it in an email appreciation note after the course ended, “I never thought I would be interested in research, but this class changed my mind!”