



Applied Sociology Thematic Group For those who work outside University

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If you were asked to design an undergraduate course in applied sociology, what would you put in it and how would you run it? That is a question put to me this week by one of our members who has been asked to do just that.

For me, there are three parts. One is gaining an extensive knowledge of the sociology theories. The second is being able to test how they can be used to answer the range of questions that can be asked of the applied sociologist and the third is having a thorough understanding of questionnaire design, both qualitative and quantitative.

Over the years I have had to deal with people who think making up a questionnaire is the easiest thing in the world and it has taken time to make them see otherwise. In addition I have been presented with a great number of 'professionally' designed questionnaires which have so many flaws in them that the data they collect has very little value, if any.

I love pointing out flaws in questionnaires that people ask me to answer. They can get very annoyed and confused if you do. One example: just before an election a few years ago a pollster at my door and was reading out various questions and came to the one election questionnaires in Australia love.

P: "On a two party preferred basis, would you vote Labour or Coalition?."

Me: "Neither."

P: "But you can't say that. You have to say one or the other."

Me: "My answer is till neither."

P: "Oh. *(Long pause)* I'll put you down as undecided."

It is a very hard thing, to cover every possible answer in a quantitative questionnaire and even when you have seemingly relatively simple choices, if you could explore a little further you would find that people would often want to pick things you had not thought of or change their answer when they had thought about the question a bit more. So that your first run at the questions can be changed significantly when people are given the chance to tell you at a later time. I designed such a methodology for my Master's thesis and used it successfully in a number of studies, and discovered lots of things that were going on which I would never of thought of myself. Sticking a questionnaire under someone's nose does not guarantee that you will get true or all possible answers.

If you have any suggestions for an applied sociology course please email them to: joshuaspiers@gmail.com.

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