

Teaching Skills and Instilling Values Through Research: A Discussion

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Abstract

Research is one of the most important components for the development of knowledge as new knowledge or innovation could be achieved through research. Research is essential to economic and social development of any country. Malaysia, one of the Southeast Asian countries, had realized the importance of research when it established research universities among its public universities. Research and research process could expose the students to new skills and values. By doing research students can learn and explore various issues. This paper is an attempt to discuss the research and the research process for the undergraduate students in Malaysia. It further states how skills and values are instilled through research and the research process would give the students an added advantage in their lives not only professionally but also personally. To achieve this objective, the paper adopts analytical approach as it wants to underline the importance of research in teaching skills and instilling values. It is demonstrated that the research process will allow the students to learn various lifelong skills including igniting the curiosity in them.

Keywords: Research, skills, teaching, undergraduate student, values

Introduction

Research is an important aspect of teaching and learning, for both the students and the lecturers who are supervising them. Research is a general term that covers all processes aiming to find responses, questions or issues through a systematic approach (Dellis, Skolarikos & Papatsoris, 2014). Apart from the students, the ability to find the responses through a research is also essential for lawyers too. The importance of research can be seen in the case of *Lougheed Enterprises Ltd v Armbruster*³ where the court held that a counsel has a duty to be aware of all cases on point decided within the judicial hierarchy, including all cases which decided on the same point of law. In order to be aware of all cases, the counsel will have to do a research on the said point of law.

Since research is essential to lawyers, most of the law schools would have a research component in their curriculum.⁴ The way the research is incorporated may differ but the goal is same, that is to teach the students the importance of research and values that are instilled in them through the research process.

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³ (1992), 63 B.C.L.R. (2nd) 316 (C. A.)

⁴ This is significant that the law students will be ultimately the future lawyers

The research component in the legal curriculum can be found in both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Yet, the focus of this article is only on the undergraduate level. At the very least, students will be asked to do research when they are required to prepare an assignment or a specific academic project. The component, which is offered, depends very much on the objectives of the law program offered by the law school.

Various research approaches

Generally, there are a few approaches of research, available to the students. The most common approaches are quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods. The quantitative research involves the collection of data so that the information can be quantified and subject to statistical treatment in order to support or refute a claim (Williams, 2007). There are three broad classifications for quantitative research: descriptive, experimental and causal comparative.

Qualitative research is a holistic approach that involves discovery, which enables the researcher to develop a level of detail from high involvement in the actual experience (William, 2007). It is less structured than quantitative research because it formulates, build new theories on inductive reasoning. There are five areas of qualitative research: case study, ethnography study, phenomenological study, grounded theory study and content analysis (William, 2007).

Mixed methods approach combines the approaches of both the quantitative and the qualitative in finding the responses. The researcher will incorporate the methods of collecting or analyzing data from the quantitative method and narrate the data according to the qualitative approach. According to Shorten and Smith “mixed methods research draws on potential strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods (Shorten & Smith, 2017).” It also allows the researchers to explore the various aspects of relationships that exist among the research questions (Shorten & Smith, 2017). It goes without saying that this method is considered as an extension to the other two methods.

The research process exposes the students to various skills and techniques in communication, as to how to ask questions, to seek clarification, to forward a view or to disagree. These skills would then be used in gathering data through various research methodology including library research and field work. Apart from that, the students are also taught on how to record what they had learned, how to transfer their thoughts and ideas into words, through further explanations and clarification of the ideas. They are taught about the importance to be objective on their findings and the findings must be supported by evidence.⁵ By discussing different situations or events, they are introduced to critical thinking, how to compare and contrast the situations in order to understand the variation in situations and applications.

⁵ By referring to the valid sources of references such as statutes, cases, text books, reference books, academic journals, conference papers and others.

The relevance of research skills to the students in the future

John K. Petrella and Alan P. Jung asked the question whether research has an appropriate place in the undergraduate curriculum of an exercise science-based department (Petrella & Jung, 2008). They were of the view that such exercise is beneficial not only to the students but to everyone including the community as a whole and this is reflected with the establishment of the Council on Undergraduate Research in 1978, Washington, D.C. while the National Conference for Undergraduate Research provides a venue for undergraduates to present findings at an annual meeting. Even though the article dealt specifically with the science-based undergraduates, the importance of research for the non-science-based undergraduates is gaining recognition, due to the fact that the findings of such research will benefit the society generally.

In order to determine the benefits of such experience to the undergraduate, a form of evaluations was formulated known as Undergraduate Research Experience (UREs). UREs are characterized by four features: mentorship, originality, acceptability and dissemination (Kardash, 2000). These features rested on the following assumptions: First, URE assume an interaction between the undergraduate research intern and the faculty mentor that is focused on the student's learning. Secondly, it is expected to lead to a meaningful contribution by the undergraduate to the research project. Third, the procedures and methods used as tools of inquiry by the undergraduate are consistent with current practices in the discipline. Fourth, the said experience is expected to culminate in a tangible product that is critiqued by other members of the discipline (Hakim, 1998). In practice these four features are reflected through:

- Mentorship-a student will be assigned to a supervisor who is responsible to guide and mentor the student throughout the research process.⁶
- Originality-after the students analyze the literature reviews, they will prepare research proposals which identify the issues, scope and methodology of the proposed research.⁷
- Acceptability-the students must work within the framework which has been designed by the faculty.⁸
- Disseminations-the complete academic project.

At the end of the whole process of research, the undergraduate students must be able to "do research in science or humanities" (in whatever discipline). This

⁶ The mechanism includes to make it compulsory for the students to meet their supervisors at least 3 times per semester and marks will be awarded for such meetings. Those students who are interested in research will meet more frequently than what is required.

⁷ Through further discussion with the supervisor, the originality of the research will be fine tune. It is always good to encourage the students to research on current issues or comparative perspectives.

⁸ The faculty will give the students the guidelines in relation to the format, the manner of presentation, the accepted sources of reference, words limit and others. Both the supervisor and the student must be responsible to ensure that these frameworks are complied with.

ability is typically defined as the understanding of a research problem in sufficient depth so as to be able to pose a question about it, determining what evidence is needed to solve the problem, and collecting the data that will answer the question (Manduca, 1997). Those who have undergone research are shown to have (Petrella & Jung, 2008):

- understanding as to the research process,
- understanding how scientists work on problems,
- learning lab techniques (sciences),
- developing skills in interpretation of results,
- the ability to analyze data,
- the ability to integrate theory and practice.

Aside from the academic aspect, the experience also benefits the students (Petrella & Jung, 2008) through:

- having tolerance for obstacles,
- learning to work independently,
- understanding how knowledge is constructed,
- self-confidence,
- understanding that assertions require supporting evidence'
- clarification of a career path (as a researcher).

The discussion above established the importance of research for the undergraduate because the skills that they learn are skills that will be relevant to them throughout their lives, not only in their professional capacities but also in their lives in general. The ability to identify the issue, the selection of method to find the answer, the relevant supportive evidence to base the answer on and the manner in which the answer is forwarded will be able to propel them forward in their chosen career. As a legally trained person, not being able to do research can be detrimental. This can be seen in the case of *Worldwide Treasure Adventures Inc v Trivia Games Inc*⁹ where the counsel had applied for an injunction without first understanding or researching on the applicable law. The judge ruled that the counsel had been negligent in the performance of his duty. The same sentiment was shared by the judge in the case of *Gibb v Jiwan*¹⁰ where the judge commented that one of the professional obligations of a counsel is to keep abreast of developments in their area of practice. This can only be achieved vide a research. The importance of research was echoed by the court in the case of *Central & Eastern Trust Co v Rafuse*¹¹ stated as follows:

⁹(1987), 16 B. C.L.R 135(S.C.).

¹⁰[1996] O.J. No. 1370 [Q.L].

¹¹[1986] 2 S.C.R. 147, 31 D.L.R. (4th) 481.

“A solicitor is not required to know all the law applicable to the performance of a particular legal service in the sense that he must carry it around with him as part of his ‘working knowledge’, without the need of further research, but he must have a sufficient knowledge of the fundamental issues or principles of law applicable to the particular work he has undertaken to enable him to perceive the need to ascertain the law on relevant points...and to discover those additional rules of law which, although not commonly known, may readily be found by the standard research techniques.”¹²

4. Research skills and instilling values

There are so many skills that the students will learn from the research project that they are going to undertake. However which skills must first be taught to the students in order for them to successfully carry out the research?

4.1. Understanding research and research process

It is important for the students to understand what is a research and the research process. A research is different from a test or an assignment. Research is defined as the systematic investigation into and study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions.¹³ Based on the said definition, research requires the student to be more involved in finding the answers to the issues, by referring to the relevant sources. It requires time and effort. The research process is one of ongoing planning, searching, discovery, reflection, synthesis, revision and learning (Bruce, 2003). As such it is important for the students to appreciate the various skills that they have to use in doing the research. Since it is an ongoing process, the students must be flexible enough to make changes as and when it is needed, whether based on the new evidence or discussion.

4.2. Understanding how researcher work on problems

Once the students understand the meaning of research and research process, then they would be ready to learn how to work on a problem. For this the students must think like a researcher. How to think like a researcher? The students must be able to understand what they are going to research on, because this will shape the type of data that the students are going to collect and who to collect it from (Bhattacharjee, 2012). The types of research that the students have opted, will also influence the data that they have collected. For example, exploratory research is often conducted in new areas of inquiry, in order to generate some initial ideas on the issue (Bhattacharjee, 2012). Descriptive research, on the other hand, is directed at making careful observations and detailed documentation of a phenomenon interest, such as collection of data on

¹² Ibid, p 524.

¹³ Oxford dictionary at www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/research. Accessed on 7.7.2014.

population (Bhattacharjee, 2012). Explanatory research seeks to explain observed problems or behaviors, in trying to find the answers as to why and how the problem happened (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

For the law students, they are taught to be critical thinker and equipped with legal skills, so that they can begin to think like a lawyer, finding new solution to the legal issues. This can be done through research. As researchers must be able to know the concepts or theories and the principles of the law in relation to a specific issue. They must be able to compare and contrast in forwarding their views and arguments. All these skills will enable them to identify the research problem or statement, the objectives and the suitable methodology to find the solution to the issue.

4.3. Learning the research techniques

Research can be conducted as quantitative research, qualitative research or mixed research. The type of research conducted will determine the techniques that must be opted for in carrying out the research. Qualitative research methods focus on discovering and understanding the experiences, perspectives and thoughts of participants, that is, qualitative research explores meaning, purpose or reality (Conrad, Serlin & Harwell, 2014). As such to obtain the data, the researcher will opt to conduct interviews or case studies. These techniques may result in different outcomes because even if the questions asked during the interviews are the same but the interaction between the questions (the researcher) and the interviewees in any given situation may differs. Quantitative research method is defined as the glue that holds the research project together, by using certain instruments, tests or surveys to collect data. It is deductive in nature in the sense that the inferences from the collected data can lead to general inferences about the characteristics of the target group (Conrad, Serlin & Harwell, 2014). The mixed research is a method in which the researcher combines the elements of qualitative and quantitative approaches (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). The purpose of this method is to expand and strengthen the research findings and conclusion (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017).

The techniques relevant for discussions are:

(a) Literature review

Literature review is the most important step of the research process in a research, whether it is a qualitative, quantitative or a mixed research of both methods. The benefits of undertaken literature review include distinguishing what has been undertaken and what needs to be undertaken, identify variables that are relevant to the topic, identify the relationships between theory or concepts and practice, distinguishing exemplary research, avoid unintentional and unnecessary replication, identify the main research methodologies and designs that have been utilized, identify contradictions and inconsistencies, and identify strengths and weaknesses of various research approaches that have been utilized (Onwuegbuzie, Leech & Collins, 2012).

Literature review is not just about collecting and summarizing literature because it involved the interpretation of the researchers on selected materials, their understanding of the current state of knowledge of the topic (Onwuegbuzie, Leech & Collins, 2012). From the literature, the researchers would be able to understand the theory or concept which formed the basis of the discussion, the methodology and the approaches taken. They would then be able to explore the gap that is not addressed by the literature and formulated new theory or concept or variation of the theory or concepts in trying to forward a case in relation to the research topic.

(b) Interviews

Interviews are structured conversation that researchers have with interviewees to solicit information from them in order to understand how they understand, experience or view some topic (Richard, 2009). The researchers will be exposed to the research ethics in conducting the research, including voluntary participation of the research subjects, their right to evaluate the information on the research, ensuring the safety of the subjects, confidentiality and copyright (Chua, 2016). The researchers will learn how to ask the questions, what kind of questions to ask, how to record and seek clarification for the questions. Lastly, the researchers will learn how to analyze and present the said analysis in their reports.

(c) Survey

The word survey is used most often to describe a method of gathering information from a sample of individuals (Scheuren, 2004). The sample is just a fraction of the population being studied, and it must be selected through a scientific model, in order to ensure that the result is reliable. The survey will use a set of questions or questionnaires to be asked to the individuals. The questions can be open-ended questions and may also include multiple choice answers. In conducting the surveys, the researchers will learn how to design the questions to reflect the purpose of the research, learn how to record the answer and to analyze the said data for the purpose of the research.

(d) Case study

This technique is used when the researcher wants to find out the why and how in relation to a specific issue. It provides an insight into an issue or to gain deeper understanding of the case (Zucker, 2009), in order to establish a trend or approach. The researchers would opt to collect data by identifying the timeframe and target group that they want to further investigate. From these data they would be able to understand the reason why such a trend or approach is relevant in relation to the issue.

4.4. Developing skill in interpretation of results

The researchers must be able to interpret the data collected for the research, by using their understanding of the concept or theory which form the basis of

their discussion. The ability to compare and contrast will further enhance the skill in interpreting the result. The legal analytical skills will allow the researchers to be creative and innovative in finding the solution to an issue based on the result. This will be handy when the researchers have to deal with new issues.

4.5. The ability to integrate theory and practice

For social science, the basis of any research is an idea, which is formulated on a theory or concept. The researchers applied the theory or concept to a practical situation and by integrating the two, the researchers would be able to evaluate the applicability of the said theory in real situation. The research would be able to expose the factors for the success of the application of the said theory or the inapplicability of the theory to the real situations. Ways to overcome this situation can be formulated as part of the research findings and recommendations.

Through all these techniques and skills, the students who did their research would be taught the importance of integrity in research. Identifying the source of references or others' views indicate accountability and honesty. So, plagiarism will not be an acceptable practice. Plagiarism can be defined as to steal and pass off other's ideas or words as one's own or to use another's production without crediting the source (Khalidkar, 2018). In the era where every information is at the click of the fingers, it is important for the students to be taught as to the sources of the information and how to use the said information correctly, by giving credits through acknowledging them in their references, be it footnotes or endnotes. The availability of various software for the students and the supervisors to check for similarity will also help to create awareness about plagiarism.

Instilling research skills and values through research structure

There are various ways in which research skills and values could be introduced. A simple structure could be seen through the need for the students to prepare assignments for various subjects. For this, the lecturer would have identified the topic and issues that must be researched on, hence the students would not have to think beyond the content of the issues required. As for mentoring through assignment's supervision, this is totally up to the discretion of the lecturers. However, it is permissible for the students to meet the lecturers to seek clarification throughout the assignment period before submitting their works.

A more structured way to expose the students to research is by including it as one of the courses in the undergraduate's program, normally in the second or third year of the program. Under this structure, the students must produce an academic project of specific number of words in length. For this kind of research, the students had to go through the various steps:

(a) Identifying the research area and research topic

For this part the students will be asked to pick areas that they are interested in, before going to the specific topic. It is believed that if it is something that they are interested in, the students will not mind to work harder in order to complete

the task. In order to find a topic, it is important for the students to start doing preliminary reading on the said areas. The preliminary reading will allow the students to review and evaluate previous research works in order to obtain information pertaining to what had been done and what the gaps are in an area or topic (Chua, 2016). The possibility to explore further, the said gaps maybe a starting point for theirs research project.

The students will have to do a lot of reading, identifying the sources, narrowing the issues in the said topic. The students need to make certain decisions as to the area, the topic and the issues. The decision must be based on reasons and justifications. The students would understand that they are not supposed to make a judgment until all the facts are known. Gathering all the relevant facts is crucial before making a decision in any situation. The students are taught the skill of decision making, using the reasoning and legal reasoning.

(b) Formulating the research proposal.

Once the preliminary reading is done, the students will be able to generally discuss the topics of their interest. The discussion with the supervisors will fine tune the topic and the students will be asked to start collecting their literature review. Reading and going through the literature will allow the students to further understand the theory or concept in relation to the topic, the gap that has not been addressed by the previous works or the need to revisit the situation due to new development in the area. The students then formulate their research proposals which include the background, problem statement, research questions, objectives of the research, methodology for the research, limitations and the synopsis of the chapters. This research proposal will be refined with the help of the supervisors and will be the map for the research.

At this stage the students are taught on how to conduct a discussion through their discussion with their supervisors. They would be exposed to various techniques of asking questions, seeking clarifications and giving their opinions. Throughout the discussions, the students will realize the importance of respecting one another and listening to others views. At the end of the exercise, the goal is to have an exchange of information in a conducive and constructive manner.

(c) Writing the academic project

Once the research proposal has been refined and accepted, then the students will continue to collect materials, reading and understanding them, compare and contrast and analyze the information. All these will be reflected in the chapters in their academic writings. The discussion must always start with the theory of concept or principle that will be the basis of the research. The data collected be it thorough interviews, survey, case studies will be analyzed in order to find the possible solution for the issues discussed in the research. The recommendations forwarded in the academic writing will be the result of the research. In order to integrate between the theory or concept and the practice, the students are advised to put forward a short, middle and long-term recommendations.

Throughout the stage, the students will have to work closely with their supervisors. They will learn to deal with constructive criticisms, to mould their views and align them with the others' views. They will learn that they may need to make corrections to their work. In order to do that they must take time to reflect, to critically think of the issues and the possible solutions based on the data collected. They must learn to put their thoughts in words not only based on their understanding but also to visualize the ability of others to understand. There is no point having brilliant ideas when the students are not able to let others understand the ideas. At the end of the process, the students will learn the importance of persevere, dedication and commitment. Giving up and nothing is possible will not be part of their attitude. Every new issue will be a welcoming challenge.

Even though all students would go through the same process, however, not all would be able to appreciate the skills that they would learn from the research process. This is because to some doing research does not have any practical connection to their studies or even their careers. Due to this attitude, the students are not interested to do research. As such even though research skills are important but research and writing is not for everyone. Nevertheless, this experience will allow the students to evaluate their interest in research.

Challenges along the way

Doing research is a long and lonely journey, while the younger generations or the students are social creatures, who must be connected to everyone all the time through the Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube etc. Researching will be difficult for them because they need to be in solitude so that the mind can think, understand and analyse the issues. The students who are always on the go, active in various activities will not enjoy the process of researching. The same is also faced by those who prefer to do their work at the eleventh hour. In order to do research, they have to make some changes as to their approach in doing things, research is not a sprint event, but a marathon.

Another challenge faced by the students, is the need to obtain knowledge or information quickly. They do not have the patience to go through the process of research since research in a continuous journey. The temptation, just simply to do it for the sake of doing it, is greater. Thus, they will opt to refer to unauthentic sources or they would just simply copy others' works, without giving due recognition, leading to plagiarism.

Not everyone can write. That is a fact. We can have students who are very good in answering examination questions but struggle with their research writing. Due to this perhaps asking everyone to write a full research writing may not be suitable. It would be better to teach them on how to do research and prepare a research proposal. The ability to identify the issues, finding the information regarding the issue and forward possible solutions to the issues will be relevant in their professional or personal lives. Completing the research writing should be an option, only opted by those who the supervisors view as able to do so. Research

should be a joyful and enriching journey but all these will be lost if the thought of doing it bring shudders to them.

It is also pertinent to touch on the challenges face in relation to the supervisors. Not all supervisors are interested in nurturing the students' researches. To them, it is a waste of time, when they can work on their own research. As such there will be supervisors who would dictate the topics to be researched on so that it will be within their areas of research. There is nothing wrong with this approach, as long the students are interested to do research in the same area too. Forcing the students to work on what they do not want will put a strain on the research process and outcome.

For the research process to be meaningful there must be cooperation between the students and their supervisors. Both of them must do their part in order to instill the skills and values through research. Respecting each other, honesty and integrity will go a long way. The fact that since all the supervisors had gone through the process of researching, they would be able to share the best practices. As such the supervisors must not dismiss the students' works, by not giving any comments for improvement or rejecting their works without concrete reasons. In order for the students to improve, they need to know where their mistakes are. Allocation of time and giving positive feedbacks are important. What the supervisors need to remember is that all of them were once students before, they went through the same process as these students are going through now, hence, a bit of empathy will be of value to the students.

At the university level, research is becoming prominently important with the establishment of research centers or research clusters or research institutes, focusing on different disciplines or fields within the university. The centers focus on promoting research and publications to increase the university's visibilities, through research grants, interdisciplinary research and inter-universities networking and collaboration. The importance of research and publication are translated into the individual key performance indicators at the university, which is in line with the job scope i.e. teaching, research and publication. Similar to the students, not all academic staffs are interested in research and publications, their focus is mainly teaching. Due to this some universities had opted to introduce different teaching tracks, allowing the staff to decide, based on their interests. The most important thing is that each of the staff must contribute for the best interest of the university, whether through research, publications and teaching. The combinations of the university, the supervisors and the students in research will further strengthen the university as the social engineer in changing the society.

Conclusion

The research process is definitely not a waste of time. It will open the students to various lifelong skills, ignite the curiosity in them and teach them both the hard and soft skills. What is more important is that the set of skills that they obtain, would include the intangible values of honesty, integrity, accountability, perseverance, hardworking, dedication, commitment, respect and

empathy. All the components in the research process will help to propel the finding of new knowledge for the betterment of the society. Thus, it is a fact that skills and values can be instilled through research and the research process.

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