

SPEED DATING MASTER CLASS

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Here is the basic idea: I meet collectively with a group of research students working on MA theses and PhD dissertations. Each student has a total of ten minutes, divided roughly evenly between the student telling me something puzzling about their research and me giving off-the-cuff comments and suggestions. The point here is NOT for students to give me a five minute summary of their research, but rather to identify a problem in need of feedback. The optimal presentation spends roughly 1-2 minutes describing the broad research question/domain and then 2-3 minutes focusing on unresolved issues: something puzzling or confusing; a bottleneck in the project; a difficult (and perhaps annoying) objection that has been raised by someone; a mysterious finding that doesn't make sense; a seemingly intractable methodological problem; an ethical issue about the research.

I call this a "speed dating mater class" because we can't beat around the bush but have to get down to the heart of issues quickly. Lots of times when people talk about their research they give what is in effect a long prologue, setting up and situating the research agenda. Here we really won't have time for that. The trick here is to figure out what you can say in five minutes or so that gives me something interesting to respond to. This doesn't have to be the central core of your project; it could be some intriguing side issue. My experience is that often the best focus is on the puzzles of the research, on the things you are struggling with -- even on things that you find completely bewildering -- rather than the main punchlines. Generally if the puzzles are highly technical, it is tough to clarify them sufficiently on our "speed date" for me to engage the issues very well, although sometimes problems of measurement are easy to talk about. In any case, this can be a lot of fun: I get you to hone in on critical issues; you force me to be nimble on my toes.

Do not think of this as an exam. If anything, I am the one being "examined": you are posing tricky problems to me about which I am supposed to have something sensible to say. And don't feel shy or reticent. I have done these kinds of events in many sociology departments and students always have found them supportive and interesting. And finally, don't worry if your research is far distant from my published work and style of research: I find it a wonderful challenge to put myself inside of other people's intellectual frameworks and topics and engage in problem-solving dialogue.