Methods of Observing Human Behavior: SESP 225-372
School of Education and Social Policy
Northwestern University
Course Syllabus – Spring 2005

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Class meets Mondays and Wednesdays 10:30 – 11:00AM in G01
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COURSE DESCRIPTION: This qualitative methods course is designed to develop the skills the School of Education and Social Policy students will need: 1) to identify topics suited to qualitative investigation; 2) to formulate qualitative research questions; 3) to determine the method(s) of investigation (field observation and interview data) most likely to obtain meaningful findings; 4) to gather, organize and evaluate qualitative data including the writing and analysis of field notes and interview transcripts; 5) to organize, synthesize, and clearly present the findings of their research. Observing Human Behavior (SESP C-372) is a required course for SESP majors and must be completed with a grade of C- or better before students may begin their practicums.

COURSE RATIONALE: At some point in their careers, most SESP graduates will be called upon to carry out applied research: to design needs assessments, conduct focus groups, evaluate existing programs and write grant proposals to obtain funding for new programs. Students who master the concepts and skills taught in this methods course will be prepared to perform these tasks. In addition, all SESP students will be required to write a final paper analyzing the information gathered from field observations and recorded in the field notes they have taken during their practicums.

COURSE TEXTS:

Spradley (1980) Participant Observation Harcourt Brace
Duneier (1992) Slim's Table U. of Chicago
Course packet of readings:(Purchased in Office of Student Affairs on the 1st floor of Annenberg from Aaron Akins.)

COURSE OBJECTIVES: By the end of this course, students will demonstrate competencies in three domains: content, skills and values:

• In the domain of Content students will:
  1. describe the distinctions between the quantitative and qualitative paradigms of gathering data and explain what types of research questions are best addressed by each; define triangulation, explain why it is valuable and when it should be used;
  2. describe the respective advantages and pitfalls of different "scientific" methods of gathering qualitative data including: in-depth interviewing, life stories, naturalistic observation, participant observation, and field work with groups of individuals, agencies and institutions;
3. know how to determine which method or methods would be most appropriate for a particular research undertaking such as an evaluation or policy study, a case study, an ethnography, a descriptive/phenomenological study, or action-oriented research;

4. enumerate and explain the significance of the special challenges of doing qualitative research: for example, gaining entry to a site, identifying key informants, the relationship between the researcher and the people being studied, knowing when enough is enough, leaving the field, etc.

• In the domain of Skills students will:

1. develop qualitative questions;

2. demonstrate an acceptable level of competence in field observation by writing and submitting field notes based on the observations;

3. prepare and present orally and in writing an analysis of the information gained through field observation as recorded in the field notes;

4. develop and use an ethics protocol statement for an interview;

5. construct an interview guide;

6. demonstrate command of basic interviewing technique by conducting, recording and transcribing two or more qualitative interviews;

7. prepare and submit a rudimentary written analysis of qualitative data obtained from verbatim interview transcripts;

8. participate as a small group research team member by organizing and analyzing data, generating a final written report;

9. make a formal oral presentation to the class.

• In the domain of Values students will

1. explain why well-designed, carefully conducted research, uncontaminated data, sound analyses of data, and unbiased conclusions that results in published findings can be critically important and to whom;

2. give written and oral explanations of why not even the most rigorous qualitative research can be totally “objective”.

3. participate in class discussions on the ethical issues involved in qualitative research including an explanation of the negative effects of research that is less than conscientious can have on participants in that research and those that rely upon its findings;

4. demonstrate a level of self-awareness of his/her epistemological stance, including an explanation of why self-awareness is essential for qualitative research in the field in which you have particular interest;

5. examine personal attitudes about the topic being researched and write a brief paper identifying those biases and how you plan to prevent your views from contaminating the observations, interviews and findings.
6. develop an appreciation of well crafted qualitative research by reading at least two examples.

Students in this course are expected to comply with the policies found in the booklet, “Academic Integrity at Northwestern University: A Basic Guide”. All papers submitted for credit in this course must be sent to Blackboard as well as delivered in hard copy. Your written work may be electronically tested for plagiarized content. For details regarding academic integrity at Northwestern, visit: http://www.northwestern.edu/ucc/. If you need a copy of the booklet visit the SESP Student Affairs Office on the 1st floor of Annenberg Hall.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities. In compliance with Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act, Northwestern University is committed to providing equal access to all programming. Students with disabilities seeking accommodations are encouraged to contact the office of Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) at 467-5530 or ssd@northwestern.edu. SSD is located in the basement of Scott Hall. SSD also has an excellent web-site which is viewable at: http://www.stuaff.northwestern.edu/ssd/

CLASS ORGANIZATION: Rather than requiring each student to design his/her own research project, gather data, analyze it and present the findings in a 10 week term, a class project is assigned that is of general interest. This assignment allows for easy access and quick organization. Students are organized into groups of 3 to 5 and focus on one aspect of the larger project. This organization fosters interaction and gives the student the experience of participating, discussing and developing a more complex and deeper understanding of the topic of interest.

CLASS PROJECT: The president of a prestigious mid-western residential university, in reviewing the university’s current publications for recruiting potential applicants, finds that the materials adequately catalog and present the range of clubs, activities, and recreational opportunities available to undergraduates, but that they fail to capture and convey the richness, vibrancy, significance, importance, and quality of student life as it is experienced. Believing that the quality of student life outside the class room is as important to potential applicants as the quality of the academics (the faculty, library, laboratories and other resources), she would like to see these recruitment materials rewritten to better reflect the reality of campus life. She decides to ask an undergraduate qualitative methods class to investigate various aspects of campus life and to report their findings.

The Many Worlds of Northwestern University Evanston Campus
You must pick a “world “ on campus that you are totally unfamiliar with. The issues of objectivity vs. subjectivity, outsider vs. insider are involved and you should feel like an outsider and uncomfortable. You may work individually or in small groups of 3-5 people with the professors approval. At a minimum you will do field observations and write comprehensive field notes, hanging out and observing students and staff as they go about their daily/work lives on campus, and conduct and record several qualitative interviews using open-ended questions developed in advance. In addition you may use with permission digital photographs, camcorders or other media. At the end of this systematic and qualitative data gathering experience you will be expected to write a paper summarizing your findings as well as make a presentation to your classmates.

Possible “Worlds at Northwestern. (Note: This list is not comprehensive so you can suggest something of interest to you during the first week of class). For each world you need to generate
a list of questions that you want to answer or at least address, as well as a list of your bias, impressions, stereotypes, etc. before you start the research. I want you to “stretch yourself” into an unfamiliar and uncomfortable situation.

The World of Music - performance, composition, jazz, pedagogy
The World of Theater and Performance, Dance
The World of Techies
The World of Intercollegiate Athletes: Men or Woman, certain sports
The World of Ethnicity on Campus: South or East Asian, African-American, Hispanic,
The World of Religion on Campus: Evangelical, Catholic, Jewish, Islam
The World of Greeks (you cannot be Greek) Men or Women
The World of University Support Staff:
  Maintenance
  Landscaping
  Safety
  Food Service
  Library services
  The Undergraduate Admissions Office
  The Development Office on Ridge
  Others

COURSE REQUIREMENTS and GRADING:

Assignment # Points
Self-awareness needed to increase objectivity:
1. Paper on your preconceived thoughts about the campus world you are exploring on campus including your position as a viewer 10 Individual
2.) Write a review of Slim’s Table discussing the strengths and weakness of the book 10 Individual
Observations and field notes:
3. Naturalistic field observation of a campus activity (1) 10 Individual
4. Naturalistic field observation of campus activity (2) 10 Individual
Interviewing:
5. Create an Interview guide and sampling frame 15 Group
6. Interview transcripts and summary #1 10 Individual
7. Interview transcript and summary #2 10 Individual
Data Analysis and Presentation:
8. Group oral presentation 20 Group
9. Group written presentation 25 Group
Attendance
10. Class attendance and informed participation 20 Individual

Possible Individual points 80
Possible Group points 60
Total Possible points 140

Note: For all papers: Learn to use the automatic header function. Last name, first name, page number and assignment must be in upper right hand corner.

The Course Outline in Brief:

Part I
The nature and purpose of qualitative research
The qualitative and quantitative paradigm
Examples of qualitative research
“Objectivity” and “subjectivity” in social science research
The importance of self-awareness in doing qualitative research
Part II
The craft of making and recording field observations
Separating description and inference

Part III
The design of qualitative research proposals and
The art of writing open-ended questions and interview protocols
The art of interviewing

Part IV
Organizing and analyzing data inductively
Presenting the findings orally and in written form.

Week 1
March 29
Topics: what is qualitative research?: A brief review
Qualitative Research as a scientific enterprise
Comparison of qualitative and quantitative research
Activities: Deciding on specific topics and forming groups
Deciding what questions each group would like to investigate.

Week 2
April 4
Topics: Examples of qualitative research
The importance of self-awareness in qualitative work
Read Slim’s Table and write a critique of it 1-2 pages

Week 3
April 11
Topics: Types of qualitative research
The importance of self-awareness for qualitative research Part II
Is there such a thing as truly “objective” research? Class discussion
The goals of social research. pp. 31- 53.
Using qualitative methods to study commonalities. pp. 78-103.

Class Brainstorming: The initial phase of planning the research project. Issues of sampling, importance of multiple perspectives and multiple sources of data.

Assignment #2: It has been observed that “Where you sit is where you stand.” In other words, how you perceive the social world depends to a great extent on your gender, socio-economic class, ethnicity, religious background, and geographic locale (rural, suburban, urban). In addition, factors specific to your personal history, e.g., family of origin, health, and accidental happenings have shaped your view of the world. In brief, you need to reflect on your stance/bias as a qualitative learner/investigator before beginning to embark on any research. How does your background affect what you see and hear? Write a 1-2 page paper.

Week 4
April 18
Topic: The craft of field observation and recording field notes
Activity: Read:
Assignment #3: Naturalistic Field Observation #1: Attend an activity relevant to the aspect of campus life that your group is examining. Make brief notes or jottings. After immersing yourself in the activity, try to focus your observations. Immediately afterwards (as soon as humanly possible) go to the computer and write extensive field notes, everything you can remember. Don’t delay. Bring the jottings and the field notes to class. You will share your observations with your group members and you will turn in the jottings and field notes in to me.

Due

Week 5 April 25
Topics: The Design of Research proposals
Triangulation in research
The Ethical Researcher

In course packet: Research Design, Outline of a Research Proposal, Outline for Qualitative Research Proposals

Ethics in research. Course packet
Handout from the Web.
Guidelines for Preparing a Consent Form. Northwestern University.
Consent Form Confidentiality Forms. Northwestern University.

Assignment #4: Naturalistic Field Observation #2: Attend another activity relevant to the aspect of campus life that your group is examining. Make brief notes or jottings. After immersing yourself in the activity, try to focus your observations. Immediately afterwards (as soon as humanly possible) go to the computer and write extensive field notes, everything you can remember. Don’t delay. Bring the jottings and the field notes to class. You will share your observations with your group members and you will turn in the jottings and field notes in to me.

Week 6 May 2
Topics: The Craft of Developing Interview Questions
The Issue of Sampling in qualitative research

In Course Packet:

**Assignment #5:** As a group, construct an interview guide for your part of this class project. Consider what questions you want to ask and have answered in the interview. Make the questions as open-ended as possible. Give some thought to the ordering of the questions and the organization of the entire interview. Decide how large the sample should be, and who should be sampled. Consider whether a focus group might be appropriate. Write the rationale for your sampling decisions and appropriate demographic data in a separate section. Check with other groups to see if there will be consistency in demographic data. Submit interview guides and sampling frame as a group. **DUE:**

Week 7    May 9  
Topic:    Interviewing: Techniques, Challenges and Pitfalls. Class discussion  

Read:

Week 8:    May 16  
Topics:    Transcribing and Summarizing Interviews  
Sharing interview material

**Assignment #6**  Interview #1 Submit a verbatim transcript and field observations that you have completed. Open with a paragraph that captures the setting in which the interview took place, the tone and quality of the interpersonal interaction(s). At the end of the interview, write a paragraph reflecting on how the interview went in general, how you felt about it and what you would do differently next time. **DUE:**

Course packet:
Chapter 8 in *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Week 9    May 23  
Topic:    Data Analysis  
What do I do with all this !!! data anyway?

Activity: Small group meetings to share interviews and develop a procedure for coding and analyzing field observations and interviews. At this point all data are collected; two observations and two interview for each group member. Think about how you want to organize your time, putting different people on different questions, material, etc.

**Assignment #7**  Interview #2 Submit verbatim transcript and field observations that you have completed. Open with a paragraph that captures the setting in which the interview took place, the tone and quality of the interpersonal interaction(s). At the end of the interview, write a paragraph reflecting on how the interview went in general, how you felt about it and what you would do differently next time. **DUE:**

In course packet:  
What is grounded theory?  Web handout.


Week 10    May 30 Memorial Day  
June 1st Last class
Topic: Presenting the findings. Consideration of purpose and audience. 
Small group meetings to prepare written report and oral presentation

Turn in final written report in hard copy.

Assignment #8 & 9: Meet in your small groups to summarize findings and to identify any patterns, themes or categories that emerged from the data. Organize the data and prepare a written report and an oral presentation. From the data you collected, what do you think should be presented about your aspect of campus life in the university publications used to recruit applicants? DUE: