METHODS OF OBSERVING HUMAN BEHAVIOR: SESP 225-372
School of Education and Social Policy
Northwestern University
Course Syllabus – Winter 2007

Instructor: Carol Gaetjens, Ph.D. e-mail: c-gaetjens@northwestern.edu
Office hours: by appointment (before and after class)

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. Completion of this course with a grade of C- or better is required for SESP majors before they may begin their practicum. Learning these skills prepares students to write a final paper on their practicum experienced based on data collected from interviews, field observations, and other materials.

COURSE RATIONALE: At some point in their careers, most SESP graduates will be called upon to carry out applied research, to design needs assessments for new services, to conduct focus groups, to evaluate existing programs, to write grant proposals for obtain funding for new programs and to make policy or program recommendations. Students who master the concepts and skills taught in this qualitative methods course will be well prepared to perform these tasks.

COURSE TEXTS:

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 and write open-ended qualitative questions about their topic;
  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 for the topic of interest;
  6. demonstrate command of basic interviewing technique by conducting,
     recording, and transcribing two or more qualitative interviews;
  7. demonstrate the basic techniques involved in field observations by conducting
     at least two observation, writing jottings and then field notes,
  8. prepare and submit a rudimentary written analysis of qualitative data obtained
     from verbatim interview transcripts and the field observations;
  9. participate as a small group research team member by organizing, coding, and
     analyzing data, generating a final written research report in academic style
     including an executive summary and policy recommendations;
 10. 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 even the most rigorous qualitative research cannot 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 and critiquing one ethnography and several shorter examples.

**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 4 to 6 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 process of gathering, coding, and analyzing data as well as a deeper appreciation of the systematic work that is required in qualitative research.

**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 classroom 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 and outsider vs. insider are involved and you should feel like an outsider and uncomfortable. You will work on the topic in small groups of 4-6 students. 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 and pilot tested by your group members 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
ter paper summarizing your findings, including making recommendations for improvement
and an oral presentation for your classmates.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS and GRADING:
Note: In assigning points, slightly more than half of your points will be earned
individually for attendance and for work you turn in with your name only. These include
the paper on self-awareness, the book review, and at a minimum two lengthy interviews
and two field observations pertaining to your topic. The remainder of the points is
assigned based on participation in the group activities, the final group report, and oral
presentation. Readings are to be completed on the day they are listed. All written
assignments should be submitted to BlackBoard on the date they are due. In addition,
hard copy of papers must be handed to the teacher on the day they are due. Skipping
class to finish a paper will cost points on the grade. If you have scheduling conflicts,
personal issues such as health or family emergencies, please notify me by e-mail. The
worst thing you can do is just “disappear” with no explanation. So please keep in touch.