Course Syllabus

SW 839-001: Special Seminar Qualitative Methods
Winter Term 2006

Thursday 10:00 - 1:00 - Room 1794

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There's not a lot to know about me . . . I'm borderline. I'm a prostitute, a heroin addict. I'd just as soon be dead, but I can't even kill myself properly. What else do you want to know?

A teenage runaway, NYC
Lundy, K. Sidewalks Talk

Course Description

This doctoral seminar is designed as an introduction to the qualitative research process. We will examine the family of research strategies that fall under the rubric of qualitative inquiry (such as auto-ethnography, ethnography, narrative analysis, text or discourse analysis, visual analysis, case study, grounded theory, oral/life history, focus groups, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, participatory action research, etc.). Course topics include: the role of qualitative research in social work and applied domains, critical examination of the ontological, epistemological and theoretical underpinnings of qualitative approaches, framing qualitative research questions, positionality and the role of the researcher, ethical and political issues unique to qualitative work, research design, collecting and managing non-numeric empirical evidence, approaches to analysis, computer assisted software, issues in writing up qualitative studies, finding scholarly publication and conference outlets for qualitative work and criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative studies. Student projects will include work with the three primary sources of empirical evidence in qualitative designs: interviews, observations, and documents (or other social artifacts). Throughout the term particular emphasis will be placed on skill development, meaning-making, and stand-point in knowledge creation and development.
Textbooks Required and Recommended

**Required Textbooks**

Course Pack – (Discussion on first day of class).


**Recommended Textbooks:**


**Assignments**

See Separate Handouts.
“Going on an Expotition?” said Pooh eagerly. “I don’t think I’ve ever been on one of those. Where are we going to on this Expotition?”

“Expedition, silly old Bear. It’s got an “x” in it.”

“Oh!” said Pooh again. “I know.” But he didn’t really.

Thursday January 5th - In which we are introduced to each other, to the course, and to the nature(s) of qualitative research and the “expotition” begins.

Course expectations, assignments, reading, and an introduction to the qualitative experience.

Reading:


Recommended Reading:


Thursday January 12th - In we examine the variety of qualitative strategies of inquiry and consider underpinnings: philosophical and theoretical.

One cannot ask an ethnographic question without some idea of what an ethnographic answer looks like…”

Harry Wolcott

Ontological, epistemological, theoretical, and methodological choices. The relationships between the big picture and ‘local” execution of research design. Assumptions about what can be know and how to go about knowing.

Reading:


**Recommended Reading:**


**Designing Studies**

“We’re going to discover the North Pole.”

“Oh!” said Pooh again. “What is the North Pole? He asked.

“It’s just a thing you discover,” said Christopher Robin carelessly, not being quite sure himself.

“Oh! I see,” said Pooh. “Are bears any good at discovering it?”

**Thursday January 19th - In which we consider qualitative research in social work and examine method.**

Two overviews of qualitative research design in social work and an international debate. Consideration of the diverse family of “qualitative” methods: case studies, focus groups, grounded theory, oral history, ethnography, auto-ethnography, narrative inquiry, ethnomethodology, phenomenology, symbolic interaction, action research, performance ethnography, participate-observation, content analysis, etc.

**Reading:**


**Recommended (These are some “classics” textbooks in more specific areas of inquiry):**


Thursday January 26 - In which we consider who we are and where we stand relative to “others” and what that means for our work.

How much personal, subjective and poetic self is openly given in the text?

Norman K. Denzin


Reading:


Recommended Reading:


Thursday February 2 - In which we consider framing qualitative research questions and consider where to go looking for answers (and try to shake ourselves from fixation with “how many”).

…science is not a collection of answers, but a way of asking questions, an enterprise driven by curiosity.


I’ll have seen 41 states in all. Is that enough for an American novelist?

Jack Kerouac

Question framing: global research questions as distinguished from interview questions, eliminating “variables” from the equation, Question evolution: getting at better questions; selecting data sources (qualitative sampling?).

Reading:


Recommended Reading:


Thursday February 9th - In which we consider the politics of qualitative approaches: class, gender, race, sexual orientation.

What is history but the biography of a few stout individuals?
Emerson

Whose science? Whose knowledge?
Sandra Harding

Considering the relationship between politics and knowledge: who frames the questions? From whose perspective and for what purpose? How are they framed? What is funded? What gets published and disseminated? Who controls knowledge? The feminist movement’s challenge to the notion of “privileged knowledge,” its construction and dissemination. How have (or has) feminist / gender / queer studies influenced research questions and methods? Has the movement changed our knowledge or value base?

Reading:


Recommended Reading:


(2002) Qualitative Inquiry, 8, 1. Special Issue: Critical race theory and qualitative research.


Empirical Evidence Gathering

There was nothing Lucy liked so much as the smell and feel of fur. She immediately stepped into the wardrobe and got in among the coats and rubbed her face against them, leaving the door open, of course, because she knew that it is very foolish to shut oneself into any wardrobe. . .She took a step further in – then two or three steps – always expecting to feel woodwork against the tips of her fingers. But she could not feel it . . . And then she saw that there was a light ahead of her; not a few inches away where the back of the wardrobe ought to have been but a long way off.

C. S. Lewis, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe

Thursday February 16 - In which we consider talking to and with others: Empirical evidence in the form of interviews.

All we ever needed was the proper point of view…
Without corrective lenses things are never twice the same.

- James Taylor

Interviewing (assorted varieties) and listening to individuals from whom we collect information. What are they saying? How are they saying it? What can individual lives, and life stories, tell us? How are lives influenced by political, historical and cultural context in which they are lived? In return, what impact do individual lives have on larger social contexts?

Reading:


Spradley, J. P. (1979). Interviewing an informant (55-68); Asking descriptive questions (78-91); Asking structural questions (120-131); Asking contrast questions (155-172). The ethnographic interview. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.


**Recommended Reading:**


**Thursday February 23** - In which we consider watching and observing others: Empirical evidence in the form of field notes.

*This was a place I had come to know intimately by sight and sound, touch and smell, a place whose arrangement of roof, walls and intervening spaces I loved with a passion that occasionally flames even now.*

Harriet Doerr, *Tiger in the Grass*

Watching, observing, seeing; Fieldnotes, memoing and recording;

**Reading:**


**Recommended Reading:**

Winter Break

Thursday March 9 - In which we consider artifacts and other records of human activity: Empirical evidence in the form of documents.

Using old ways is a glorious way to make new things.
The man with the best future is the one with the longest memory.
Lionel Poilane, Parisian Baker

Looking for evidence in products: Assorted documents (newspapers, legislative hearing, etc); assorted representations (photographs, films) and other places to look for evidence. What objects, documents, records, and other cultural and historical artifacts can tell us. How letters, diaries, newspapers, photographs, case records, etc. can be useful to a researcher. Why is a record, photograph, object kept? Who kept it? What meaning does it hold and for whom? What does it tell us about the person, the agency, the business, the culture or the society? Is the meaning the same or different for the producer and consumer, from one culture to another, etc.?

Reading:


1 “In the early 1980s, Mr. Poilane decided to tap into the memories of the oldest bakers in the country for advice on how to reproduce the older less refined bread of ordinary people. For two years, with the help of two students, he contacted more than 10,000 bakers.” NYT, Lionel Poilane, Parisian Baker, Missing in Helicopter Crash.
Empirical Evidence Analysis

*But if every time I want to sit down for a little rest, I have to brush away half a dozen of Rabbit’s smaller friends-and-relations first, then this isn’t an Expo — whatever it is — at all, it’s simply a Confused Noise.*

That’s what I say.

Eeyore

**Thursday March 16** - In which we consider making sense of what we’ve gotten: describing and interpreting.

> My thoughts are scattered and they’re cloudy,
> They have no borders, no boundaries
> They echo and they swell
> From Tolstoy to Tinker Bell
> Down from Berkeley to Carmel
> Got some pictures in my pocket and a lot of time to kill.

-Simon and Garfunkel

*If the material tells you ‘it may be this’, allow that. Don’t turn it aside and call it an exception, an aberration, a contaminant…The important think is to develop the capacity to see one kernel (of maize) that is different and make that understandable…If something doesn’t fit there’s a reason, and you find out what it is.*

-Barbara McClintock (cited by Doucet & Mauthner in in Mauthner, Birch, Jessop & Miller)

**Reading:**


Recommended Reading:


Thursday March 23 - In which we consider tools and approaches to making sense of what we’ve gotten (CONTINUED).

After removing all the pairs, consolidate the tableau. That is, back up all the remaining cards so as to make the rows solid as far as the cards go, from top down. Keep the cards in the same order they were dealt, reading from left to right and from top row down.
Monte Carlo Solitaire Instructions
Chances of winning 1:8

Reading:

Continue Reading from Above.

Rigor, Writing Up & Ethical Dilemmas

“. . . a little girl in the fifth grade tells me that the first thing she would do if somebody gave money to her school would be to plant a row of flowers by the street. “Blue flowers,” she says. “And I’d buy some curtains for my teacher.” And she specifies again: “Blue curtains.”

I ask her, “Why blue curtains?”

“It’s like this,” she says, “The school is dirty. . . . What we need to do is first rebuild the school. Another color. Build a playground. Plant a lot of flowers. Paint the classrooms. Blue and white. Fix the hole in the principle’s office. Buy doors for the toilet stalls in the girls’ bathroom. Fix the ceiling in this room. It looks like somebody went up and peed over our heads. Make it a beautiful clean building. Make it pretty. Way it is, I feel ashamed.”

Jonathan Kozol, Savage Inequalities

Thursday March 30 - In which we comment “yes, it’s interesting” but ask “is it good?” Quality and rigor in qualitative research.

Rigor should be a signal to the historian that the maps have been made, and the real explorers have gone elsewhere.

W. S. Anglin

This class will examine the on-going discussion around standards for qualitative methods. How do you recognize good or bad qualitative research? What criteria should be used in assessing qualitative studies? How is “interpretive validity” achieved (if at all)? Should qualitative research be reliable? Replicable? Generalizable? Transferable?

Reading:


**Recommended Reading:**


**Thursday April 6 - In which we consider the art and craft of writing up qualitative “science.”**

Our society is structured around the telling of stories. Religion tells stories, politicians tell stories, business is in a large way a storytelling profession, and science is a telling of stories.

D. Spangler & W. I. Thompson, Reimagination of the World

An arrow travels in one fashion, but the mind in another. Ever when the mind is feeling its way cautiously and working round a problem from every angle, it is still moving directly onwards and making for its goal.

Marcus Aurelius, Meditations

Representation, member checking, who owns the “scientific narrative”? Qualitative studies are perhaps less formulaic in their format than quantitative but NOT less disciplined or rigorous. This class will consider the pain, and pleasure, of qualitative reporting. What role does the researcher play in shaping the presentation? What is included and omitted? Why? Where does data analysis end and data interpretation begin? What textual evidence supports the findings? What “lies” have been told in the process?

**Reading:**


**Recommended:**


**Thursday April 13 - In which we consider the ethics of this brand of inquiry: Institutional and Otherwise.**

“My dear Pooh,” said Owl in his superior way, “don’t you know what an Ambush is?”

“Owl,” said Piglet, looking at him severely, “Pooh’s whisper was a perfectly private whisper and there was no need——”

“An Ambush,” said Owl, “is a sort of surprise.”

A.A. Milne


**Reading:**


Recommended


Thursday April 20 - In which we consider qualitative dissertations. (As well as finish up and say goodbye).

Reading:


**NOTE OF ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:** I would like to gratefully acknowledge and thank those who contributed syllabi to the CSWE compendium of model syllabi and/or who have posted their syllabi on the Web. I have scavenged mercilessly and benefited greatly from the years of accumulated experience in teaching doctoral qualitative seminars. The final product, however, is uniquely my own and I take full responsibility for any of its shortcomings as we try to cram too much into too short a period of time.
A selective sample of classic qualitative studies.


Ellis, C. (XXXX). *Final Negotiations*.


