

**Foundations of Qualitative Research
CSUS 831**

Spring 2020

Tuesday 3:00-5:50 p.m. – 102 Farrall Agric. Engineering Hall

Thursday 12:40-2:30 p.m. – 225 Natural Resources Bldg.

Instructor

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I. Course description

This 5-credit course provides a hands-on introduction to the use of qualitative research methods. The course is organized around a class project that is designed to help us develop specific qualitative data collection and data analysis skills. Data collection methods include: informal and semi-structured interviewing, direct observation, and focus groups. We will also practice the management and analysis of these data. Throughout the course, students will be asked to consider the advantages and disadvantages associated with each method and to consider alternate methods of data collection and analysis. ***The course requires significant time outside of class*** to collect and analyze data. The format is varied and will include lectures, discussion, group work, class presentations, and practical experience with the methods.

There are no pre-requisites for this course, but previous research experience is helpful. Students who plan to use qualitative techniques in their thesis or dissertation tend to benefit the most.

Course Aims

- To introduce students to a number of techniques that are used to collect and analyze qualitative data and to provide practical experience with each.
- To help students think analytically about a given research question and to design an appropriate qualitative strategy to answer that question.
- To encourage students to understand the vast heterogeneity in methodologies that employ qualitative research techniques and to think critically about how epistemological priors may affect the choice of methodology as well as study conclusions.

- To examine the nature of qualitative research and to reflect upon the standards of rigor placed upon it.
- To develop an appreciation for the relationship between the purpose of a research project, the theoretical framework underlying it, and the proposed research questions.
- To develop judgement and intuition about how to conduct an emergent research study.

Course Objectives

At the end of the course, students should be able to:

- Demonstrate the ability to collect and analyze data using the methods presented in class.
- Design and conduct a small research project that uses qualitative methods to achieve a stated objective.
- Identify the strengths and weaknesses of each technique as well as the limitations of research findings.
- Write a concise research report that clearly presents the motivation, objectives, methods, results, limitations, and conclusions of a qualitative project.
- Appreciate the virtues and limitations of a qualitative approach to research and the role that it may play in addressing scholarly as well as practical questions.

II. Course Format

The course is structured as a seminar, with emphasis on discussion and active practice with various research techniques. We will usually start with a discussion about a given research technique or research issue (hopefully keeping formal lectures to minimum). Students should do the assigned readings before class and be prepared to discuss the ideas, methods, and applications presented in these works. Following these discussions there will often be some type of in-class or 'laboratory' exercise, in which students practice a qualitative research technique and then discuss their experiences. Once our projects get underway, a significant amount of class time will be devoted to supporting students' work on their projects, with several dates in April identified as "workshop" days where students may come in and get whatever help they need on their project. Finally, midway through the course we will evaluate how it is going and try to make whatever changes we can to meet our course objectives and/or improve the experience.

Collegiality is important in this course. Each of us should feel free to raise questions, share research experiences during class, bring interesting articles or issues to class, or make

suggestions about how we do things. The course is taught in an interdisciplinary fashion and it is expected that there will be diversity in disciplinary backgrounds and epistemological beliefs. As such, it is important that we cultivate a culture of open-mindedness in the class

Required Readings

The course readers will be posted on-line on the class' D2L website under "Content." All of the required readings will be posted there, but some students may want to purchase the textbooks from which many of the readings are derived. There are several readings from: Rubin H. and Rubin I. 2012. *Qualitative Interviewing. The Art of Hearing Data*, Third Edition. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. I have also recommended two additional books as general references for those who may do qualitative theses or dissertations. Each of these is very hands-on and practical:

Patton, Michael Quinn. 2015. *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Method, Fourth Edition*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Maxwell, Joseph. 2012. *Qualitative Research Design. An Interactive Approach, Third Edition*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

All of these texts are good reference books for those doing qualitative theses; take the opportunity to have a look at them and considering buying one or two if you will be doing qualitative research for your thesis or dissertation.

There will be a lot of materials distributed for the course. These materials are very useful for the final project. In the past some students have found it helpful to use a binder to organize their course handouts, completed assignments, notes, and comments from me about the term project. It might sound silly, but it really does help to track comments and progress on the project and the class in general.

III. Description of Assignments

This course will require a significant amount of time out of class to collect and analyze data. One of the biggest challenges of using some qualitative techniques is the amount of time required to do a good job. It's important that you budget your time carefully and plan ahead for all the assignments, particularly the research exercises that are done for the final project.

3.1. Research Exercises (40%)

Students are required to turn in a series of written research exercises that have been conducted outside of class. The research exercises are based on the methods presented in class. They are:

1. Research design (5% of final grade)
2. Interview guide and related informed consent procedure (5%)
3. Interview I (10%)
4. Interview II (10%)
5. Observation (10%)

Detailed guidelines for each exercise will be distributed in class and posted on D2L. Completed assignments should be type-written. Your raw data (jottings, expanded field notes) should be included in the research exercise. Research exercises should be handed in at the beginning of class on the day they are due. Grades will be commensurate with your ability to meet the expectations of the assignment. Please note: grammar, clarity, referencing style, and conciseness all count.

3.2. Final Research Project (35%)

Students will carry out a research project using a combination of the methods presented in the course. By **Thursday, January 16th**, students will have selected topics for their research projects. During the semester students will design five separate research exercises (see above), each which will address their research topic. Students will carry out the research exercises individually, but will share their experiences and research exercise reports with colleagues in the class.

In addition to these five research exercises, each student is required to complete one additional piece of qualitative research (e.g. a semi-structured interview, observation, focus group) for the final project. Students are expected to justify their choice of additional method. At the end of the semester each student will turn in a final report (35%). Expanded field notes and other illustrative materials (memos, displays, etc.) should be included as appendices to the report. Details on the format of the report will be handed out later in the semester.

The final research report will be due **Tuesday, April 28st**. On **Thursday, April 30**, the final reflection statements about the research process are due. Please note that it is very important to keep pace with the assignments in the class so that you will stay on track to finish the final project. The suggested timetable for the data collections is as follows:

Suggested Data Collection Schedule for Final Project

Interview I	February 12 – February 19
Interview II	February 25 – March 13
Observation	March 15 – March 25
Final Data Collection	March 19 – April 4
Data Analysis and Report Writing	April 8 – April 29
Reflection	April 29 – April 30

3.3. Short Homework Exercises (10%)

Throughout the course students will be asked to complete short ‘homework assignments’ outside of class. These assignments will be turned in at the beginning of the next class. The purpose of these assignments is to 1) provide material for in-class laboratory work/discussions; and/or 2) encourage progress on the data collection/analysis for the final research project.

These exercises will not be graded per se. Rather students will earn a point for turning in a *completed* assignment. It is expected that there will be roughly 10-12 homework assignments during the semester.

3.3. Class Participation (10%)

I believe that active participation in this class is necessary to absorb the principles and skills that are presented. Active learning is very much analogous to qualitative research. You have to ask questions, listen carefully to others, engage your brain in the process, digest the material that has been explicitly presented, and probe for tacit knowledge.

Expect to attend class prepared, participate in discussions, work earnestly on in-class laboratories, be open-minded and provide collegial support to fellow students. Do this and you will receive full credit in this area.

3.4. Final Reflection Statement (3%)

The purpose of this assignment is to allow you to step back and consider what you have learned in the course. We are often busy “doing” during the semester and it’s important to stop and reflect on what we have learned and where we want to go next with developing our own practice.

IV. Course Evaluation

With respect to grading, the percentages below reflect the relative weight of an assignment in determining your final grade.

ASSIGNMENT	WEIGHT
Research Exercises (5 total)	40%
Homework assignments/Progress Reports	12%
Research Project	35%
Class participation and collegial support of colleagues' learning	10%
Final Reflection	3%

A Note on Grading. Throughout the course I will give you feedback on your work. As a word of warning, I leave a lot of space in the points spread so that I can give students an indication of how they need to progress and improve their practice; so the numeric marks can be low. Don't let this alarm you too much as the final grades are adjusted to take this into account. So, try not to convert numeric grades to a straight percentage and make an assumption about what that means. In addition, try not to get obsessive about every single point.

To help those who are conscious of grades, I will also try to give students an indication of "where you stand in the class" from time to time. I try to focus on what we are learning rather than grades, but I am sympathetic to students' desire to have feedback about how they are faring in the class. If you feel unsure about this you should always feel free to come talk to me and ask me; it's completely fair—so don't be embarrassed if you are concerned. Additionally, with research exercises I allow students to resubmit any exercise one time if they wish to improve their grade, or to gain comments on an improved effort.

V. Course Policies

5.1. **Class attendance.** Students are expected to attend class and to be on time. Absences will be noted. If you are sick, please stay home and get well. However, please notify the instructor beforehand for anticipated absences or as soon as possible for unexpected absences. If you miss class it is your responsibility to obtain lecture notes from fellow students and check D2L for upcoming assignments.

- 5.2. ***Class conduct.*** It's important that we are all "present" while we are in class. I therefore ask that we refrain from using devices during class that may take us away from the work we are doing together. Of course you can use a computer or device to take notes, but please no texting, social media, or web surfing while we are together in class.
- 5.3. ***Readings.*** Be ready to discuss them in depth in class. The readings are chosen carefully to give you background information about the different data collection and analysis techniques and are helpful resources when carrying out your own Research Exercises.
- 5.4. ***Late assignments.*** It is important to stay on top of the workload in this class. In order to help you stay on track, late assignments should be okayed with me.
- 5.5. ***Grading*** – I allow students to resubmit any research exercise one time if they wish to improve their grade, or to obtain comments on an improved effort. The only rules are 1) you should turn in your new version with changes highlighted so it is easy for me to see them; 2) attach the "old" assignment; and 3) submit the "re-do" before the next research exercise is due. The latter helps to reinforce learning that will be applied to the next steps.
- 5.6. ***Use of Desire to Learn (D2L)*** – All readings and detailed guidelines for homework assignments will be posted on D2L. Additionally, completed assignments should be posted on D2L by the assigned date, with a printed copy to turn in during class. Posting your assignments online allows other colleagues in the class to view them and learn from each other's work.
- 5.7. ***Accommodations*** – If you need accommodations in this class related to a disability or religious holidays, please make an appointment with me to discuss as soon as possible.
- 5.8. ***Academic Integrity*** – [Article 2.III.B.2](#) of the SRR states: "The student shares with the faculty the responsibility for maintaining the integrity of scholarship, grades, and professional standards." In addition, (insert name of unit offering course) adheres to the policies on academic honesty specified in General Student Regulation 1.0, [Protection of Scholarship and Grades](#); the all-University Policy on [Integrity of Scholarship and Grades](#); and [Ordinance 17.00](#), Examinations.

Therefore, unless authorized by your instructor, you are expected to complete all course assignments, including homework, lab work, quizzes, tests and exams, without assistance from any source. You are expected to develop original work for this course;

therefore, you may not submit course work you completed for another course to satisfy the requirements for this course. Also, you are not authorized to use the www.allmsu.com Web site to complete any course work in this course. Students who violate MSU regulations on Protection of Scholarship and Grades will receive a failing grade in the course or on the assignment.

Faculty are required to report all instances in which a penalty grade is given for academic dishonesty. Students reported for academic dishonesty are required to take an online course about the integrity of scholarship and grades. A hold will be placed on the student's account until such time as the student completes the course.

VI. Course Schedule

See reading list for weekly assigned readings

Week #	Date	Topic	Assignments Due
1	January 7	Introduction and overview	
	January 9	What is a qualitative approach?	
2	January 14	Epistemology, theoretical perspectives, methodology & method	HW 1: entry statement (post Jan 13 so people can review)
	January 16	Developing Study Questions	HW 2: draft study questions
3	January 21	Qualitative Research Design	
	January 23	Qualitative Research Design	
4	January 28	Human subjects issues	RE 1 –study plans: or Jan 24 for early feedback
	January 30	Interviewing overview	
5	February 4	Interview Exercise	
	February 6	Interview Tips	RE 2 –informed consent & interview guide
6	February 11	Direct Observation	
	February 13	Direct Observation	HW 3: 2 paragraphs
7	February 18	Observation Techniques & Field notes	Note: new meeting place
	February 20	Coding	RE 3: Interview I Report
8	February 25	Coding Exercise	HW 4a: Read coding data
	February 27	Coding	HW 4b: Develop codes
	March 3 & 5	SPRING BREAK – NO CLASS	

9	March 10	Coding	HW 5: Coding exercise
	March 12	Modes of Analysis	HW 6: Observation plan
10	March 17	Focus Groups I	RE 4: Interview II Report
	March 19	Focus Group II	
11	March 24	Displays	HW 7: Raw notes 3 rd data collection
	March 26	Displays II	HW 8
12	March 31	Displays III	RE 5: Observation Report
	April 2	Writing it Up	HW 9: Repackaging/Reducing your Data
13	April 7	Validity	
	April 9	Workshop Day	HW 10: Creating Displays
14	April 14	Generalizability	
	April 16	Participatory Research	HW 11: Progress Report
15	April 21	Mixed Methods	
	April 23	Workshop Day	Final Paper Due Tuesday, April 28
Finals Week	April 27-30	Reflection	Reflection Statement Due Thursday, April 30