Qualitative Research Methods
MIT CMS.702 / 802, Spring 2024
https://canvas.mit.edu/courses/25700

Instructor: T.L. Taylor   **Class**: T 2-5
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Office hours: Before/after class & by appointment

Description and Learning Objectives
This course focuses on a number of qualitative social science methods that can be productively used in research including interviewing, participant observation, focus groups, cultural probes, and visual sociology. The emphasis will primarily be on understanding and learning concrete techniques that can be evaluated for their usefulness in any given project and utilized as needed. Data organization and analysis will be addressed. Several advanced critical themes will also be covered, including risk, reciprocity, disruption, privacy, and generalization. This course does not have any pre-requisites but it does require a willingness to work hands-on with learning various social science methods and a commitment to the preparation for such (including reading, discussion, and reflection).

After successful completion of the course the student should be able to:
- Identify appropriate methods for particular research questions
- Reflect on ethical issues within a study & prepare an IRB application
- Carry out a variety of qualitative research methods
- Understand the basics of post-collection analysis

Learning Activities
The course will be taught via a combination of lectures, class discussions, group exercises, and assignments.

Assignments & Grading
Your final grade will consist of the following components. Your hand-ins must reflect your sole work and authorship rather than a group effort unless otherwise specified.
- 20% Participation including reading prep & leading one of the advanced topics
- 20% Human subjects online training & ethics assignment – March 5
- 60% Technique write-ups (20% each) – April 2, April 30, May 14

Additional details will be provided on the various assignments. They will be due on Canvas at the beginning of class on the assigned date unless otherwise indicated. Students enrolled in the graduate number for this class are expected to work at a level commensurate with advanced study.

Policies and Expectations
Participation & engagement: You should come to our sessions prepped, having done the readings, have them at hand during class, and being ready to be involved in our shared time. Full participation means not simply attending, but being truly engaged; not only speaking, but actively listening to fellow class members and engaging in conversation together. We often discuss complex, even difficult topics and we should all enter those as thoughtful, generous listeners. I strongly encourage you to not check email, social media, etc. and really focus on being present and attentive. If laptop use/distraction becomes an issue, restrictions may be utilized.

Health protocols: If you have flu-like or Covid symptoms, or other reasons to be concerned that you might be contagious, please stay home and rest. Email me when you can so we can make sure we accommodate your absence. I do not record our classes out of consideration for both student privacy and the desire to retain a space of open conversation but if I use a presentation "deck" I will upload the pdf and I will share any links used in the class via Canvas. I also encourage you to reach out to one of your fellow students to check in on any notes, insights, etc. from class they may have to share. Let's all look out for each other and be as safe as possible!

Late work: I am happy to give you a one day automatic extension for <u>one</u> of the assignments (no explanation needed, just notify me if you need it). Beyond that, extensions without penalty can be granted if I receive a note of support

from MIT Student Support Services (S³ @ http://web.mit.edu/uaap/s3/); they are a vital resource to be connected to for help. I am also happy to make accommodations for religious holidays if notified in advance. Any late work beyond this framework is penalized at a full grade per day.

Writing and presentation assistance: The Writing and Communication Center offers free one-on-one professional advice from communication experts with advanced degrees and publishing experience. The WCC can help you learn about all types of academic and professional writing and further develop your oral communication skills. You can learn more about the WCC consultations and access advice about writing and oral presentations at http://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center/.

Library and research assistance: The work you do in this course may require social scientific literature searches (well beyond just "googling") and evaluation of those materials. The libraries offer useful help and advice for how to find relevant materials. See http://libraries.mit.edu/research-support/ for assistance. You may also find the research resources I link to on my website helpful: http://tltaylor.com/teaching/research-resources-for-students/.

Academic integrity: I take academic integrity very seriously and consider it a core foundational principle of the university and research more broadly. As noted in the CMS/W guidelines on plagiarism, "Plagiarism - use of another's intellectual work without acknowledgement - is a serious offense. It is the policy of the CMS Faculty that students who plagiarize will receive an F in the subject, and that the instructor will forward the case to the Committee on Discipline. Full acknowledgement for all information obtained from sources outside the classroom must be clearly stated in all written work submitted. All ideas, arguments, and direct phrasings taken from someone else's work must be identified and properly footnoted. Quotations from other sources must be clearly marked as distinct from the student's own work. For further guidance on the proper forms of attribution, consult the style guides available in the Writing and Communication Center and the MIT Website on Plagiarism located at: http://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center/avoiding-plagiarism/." Please don't hesitate to talk to me if you have any questions about this issue.

Reading Material
Course articles will be made available via Canvas. Depending on our evolving conversations I may make slight substitutions to weekly readings as we go; I'll let you know in class if I do but you should also always check the site before you start each week's work. You must bring a copies of all assigned readings with you to class, either in electronic or paper form.

Schedule

Feb 6 – Introduction
Course introduction, expectations, scope.
- Becker – "How I learned what a crock was" (in-class hand-out)

Feb 13 – Framing Social Science Research
What different methods are good for, evidence and argumentation, social science and qualitative methods.
- Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, Taylor – "10 myths of ethnography"
- May – "Perspectives on social science research"
- Flyvbjerg – "Five misunderstandings about case study research"

  No advanced topic

Feb 20 – No class, Monday schedule due to President's Day holiday

Feb 27 – Ethics
Practical and critical issues around human subjects research
- Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, Taylor – "Ethics" and "Human subjects clearance and IRBs"
- May – "Values and ethics in the research process"

- Fine et. al. – "For whom?"

March 5 – Interviews
Recruiting/approaching, open-ended vs. structured, formal vs informal, thematic, biographical, questioning, recording, transcribing, coding, organizing, synthesizing. Directed vs semi-directed, marketing vs. social science.
- Crang & Cook – "Interviewing"
- Nairn – "A counter-narrative of a 'failed interview'"
- Walling – "The challenge of in-depth interviewing with disadvantaged respondents"

No advanced topic
Ethics assignment due to Canvas by 2p

March 12 – No class

March 19 – Participant Observation
Negotiating entry, self-presentation, fieldnotes, levels of involvement, exit.
- Emerson et. al – "Participant observation and fieldnotes"
- Kusenbach – "Street phenomenology"
- Pink – "Re-sensing participant observation"

Advanced topic: Risk
- Ferrell – "Criminological verstehen"

March 26 – No class, Spring Break

April 2 – Visual Materials, Cultural Probes, and Artifacts
Working with the visual as a node of social life, producing images within fieldwork, privacy & publics, using the visual for analysis and argumentation. Using documents, archives, 3rd party materials. Artifacts to capture and elicit data, activity-logs, time journals, use in creative design research vs. social science.
- Pink – selections from *Doing Visual Ethnography*
- Gaver – "Cultural probes"

No advanced topic this week
Technique write-up #1 (either on interviewing or participant observation) due to Canvas by 2p

April 9 – Online Fieldwork & Technology
Weaving analysis of technology, infrastructures, and non-human actors into qualitative research. Working with online fieldsites, cross-platform and networked modalities.
- Taylor – "The assemblage of play"
- Star – "Ethnography of infrastructure"
- Sandvig – "How technical is technology research?"
- Light, Burgess, and Duguay – "The walkthrough method"

Advanced topic: Privacy
- Seveningsson Elm – "How do various notions of privacy influence decisions in qualitative internet research?"

April 16 – Institutional Fieldwork
Utilizing institutional contexts and fieldsites in a project, stakeholders across organizations, special challenges of access, NDA, and other structural factors when dealing with organizations.
- Thomas – "Interviewing important people"
- Gusterson – "Studying up revisited"
- Murray – "A spy, a shill, a go-between"

- Seaver – "After secrecy"

April 23 – Usability
Utilizing some basic observation and interview techniques for applied purposes.
- Kuniavsky – "Do a Usability Test Now!" and "Usability Tests"

No advanced topic this week

April 30 – Final Stage Analysis
Some additional techniques/tricks/approaches to analyzing material not previously covered in weekly sessions.
- Crang & Cook – "Analyzing field materials"
- Fetterman – "Finding your way through the forest"

No advanced topic this week
Technique write-up #2 (on any of the techniques covered from April 2-23) due to Canvas by 2p

May 7 – Writing & Storytelling
Writing and the creation of truths, social fictions, thinking about audiences/uses of social science.

- Crang and Cook – "Writing through materials"
- Lareau – "Writing"

No advanced topic this week

May 14 – No class

Technique write-up #3 (on any technique you've not yet written on) due to Canvas by 2p