

ICS 235A: Qualitative Research Methods

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Overview

The goal of this class is to introduce you to the use of qualitative field methods, in particular ethnographic investigation, with particular application to the use and design of information systems. Ethnographic techniques have become a key component of contemporary research in human-computer interaction, computer-supported cooperative work, organizational information systems, and ubiquitous computing, as well as in requirements engineering more generally. However, much controversy still surrounds the use of these methods, and much mystery attends their practice. Attempting to resolve these issues completely in ten weeks would be foolhardy; however, we can at least look into the major issues from a methodological, analytical, and practical perspective. If you are considering making use of qualitative methods in your dissertation research, I'd strongly recommend following this class up with a 299 or similar research project that will let you gain more experience.

Ethnographic investigation isn't something that can be usefully discussed abstractly; we need to combine theory and practice. So, my plan for the class is that we'll follow two tracks simultaneously. In one, we'll look at the ethnographic approach itself – where it comes from, how it has been adopted in computer systems design and analysis, what it means to conduct design-oriented ethnography, the pragmatics of ethnographic observation and analysis, and some issues and debates in contemporary ethnography. At the same time, in the other track, we'll attempt to apply these techniques and see how they work in practice.

In HCI design, ethnography is often reduced to observation and summarization. We're going to try to go beyond that, and take a strongly analytic approach, with a focus on writing and interpretation. Students will work in pairs through the quarter. In the first few weeks, there will be a range of small exercises; the latter part of the quarter will be spent on a more substantive project. The goal, though, is not so much to present finished work as to deal collectively with the materials and their analysis, and to reflect on the process and the experience. We are all, therefore, going to be relying on each other a great deal, in data collection, in analysis, and in integration; taking this class is very much a commitment to mutual support and engagement.

The approach I'm going to take here is to think about ethnography as a series of textual practices. Certainly, observation and interviewing – the pragmatics of ethnography – are critically important. But I want also to focus on the textual practices that run through any ethnographic project – the creation of fieldnotes, the analysis of materials, and the problems of representation and reportage. We'll use this concern with textual practices as a way to organize the material.

Practical Exercises

The class will mix theory and practice throughout the quarter. At the same time as we are discussing analytic approaches and practical methods, you will be collecting and analyzing data which we will discuss in class and use to make the ideas more concrete. Practical work will be conducted in pairs; working together will force you to articulate and question your assumptions, discuss your data explicitly, and generally enhance the process. This work will be required of everyone, including those auditing the class. For the first couple of weeks, we will focus on exercises that I will give out. The bulk of the class, though, should be spent looking at particular settings or activities that you are interested in and that you will define.

Human Subjects

Like any other form of research inquiry that involves human subjects, ethnographic studies require IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval. In general, we don't need to seek IRB approval for class-based projects; however, if you have any thought that your research project might turn out to be something that you'd like to write up and publish, or share beyond the class, then you will need IRB approval. Accordingly, I'd like people to file IRB approvals for their projects. Since such approval takes a week or two to come through, we need to do this very promptly – *by the end of week 1 or the start of week 2*. This implies that we need to form pairs and decide on project directions right away when the class starts. You will also have to take the online human research tutorial (<http://tutorials.rgs.uci.edu>) as a requirement for filing your IRB approval.

Grading

Your grade will be based primarily on a paper submitted on the basis of your project work, as well as one or two shorter writings assigned as the class proceeds. A significant component of your grade will depend on participation in our in-class discussions.

Readings

For each section of the class, I've outlined a series of readings from which I expect to draw in discussions. There are two sorts of reading we'll deal with – methodological readings that address topics of research methods and procedures, and ethnographic studies that we can look at as examples. In the readings below, I've largely listed the former; we'll determine the latter as we go along.

There are three books that you should have. Lofland and Lofland's "Analyzing Social Settings" is a brief and readable overview of ethnographic methods and analysis; we'll use this to get a quick overview at the start. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw's "Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes" covers some of the same ground but in more depth and is more concerned with the generation of ethnographic analysis through engagements with text, which is a focus I want to take here. Finally, Becker's "Tricks of the Trade" is more concerned with what we might call the "sociological imagination," providing a range of ways of making sense of and getting to grips with ethnographic materials. Through the class, I'll provide other readings, largely journal articles and book chapters, to illustrate or explore particular points (many listed below.)

At the end of this document, I've provided a list of other readings; you are certainly not expected to read all of these, but they might be useful for you in elaborating some point or other.

Timetable

Part I – Overview of Ethnography and System Design (Weeks 1-3)

We will start off with a broad overview of the ethnographic process, to get up to speed quickly on the major elements of this process. The goal is to get a high-level view; we'll drill down into more detail later.

In particular, we will explore the particular context within which we are looking towards the use of ethnographic methods, which is the design and analysis of information systems. Traditional ethnography is a means to understand cultures and practices; what does it mean to do this with an eye towards the potential design of new technologies? How is ethnography repurposed in the different arenas in which it employed as a research approach?

During this period, we will also settle on projects, take the Human Research online tutorial, file IRB approvals, and do some initial observations of public activity.

Readings:

- Anderson, R. 1996. Work, Ethnography, and System Design. Technical Report EPC-1996-103, Rank Xerox EuroPARC, Cambridge, UK.
- Anderson, R. 1994. Representation and Requirements: The Value of Ethnography in System Design. *Human Computer Interaction*, 9, 151-182.
- Forsythe, D. 1999. "It's just a matter of common sense:" Ethnography as Invisible Work. *Journal of Computer-Supported Cooperative Work*, 8(1-2), 127-145.
- Lofland, J. and Lofland, L. 1994. *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*. Wadsworth.
- Salvador, T., Bell, G. and Anderson, K. 1999. Design Ethnography. *Design Management Journal*, 19(4), 35-41.
- Geertz, C. 1973. Thick Description. From "The Interpretation of Cultures." Basic Books.
- Geertz, C. 1973. Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight. From "The Interpretation of Cultures." Basic Books.

Part II – Ethnographic Investigation and Analysis (Weeks 4-8)

For the major section of the class, we will explore a range of issues concerning both ethnographic pragmatics (fieldnotes, interview techniques, maintaining relationships) and analysis methods (coding and working with ethnographic materials, gaining analytic purchase.)

We will do this through a combination of lectures, discussions, and working sessions. The working sessions will be based on materials from your own projects.

Readings:

- Barley, S. 1990. Images of Imaging: Notes on Doing Longitudinal Fieldwork. *Organizational Science*, 1(3), 220-247.
- Emerson, R., Fretz, R. and Shaw, L. 1995. *Writing Ethnographic Field Notes*. Chicago.
- Weiss, R. 1994. *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: The Free Press. (excerpts)
- Becker, H. 1998. *Tricks of the Trade: How to think about your research while you're doing it*. Chicago.
- Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. 1990. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage. (excerpts).
- Star, L. 1999. The Ethnography of Infrastructure. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 43(3), 377-391.

Part III – Issues in Contemporary Ethnography (Weeks 9-10)

Authority. Representation. The ethnographer as subject and object. Issues in comparative ethnography. Ethnography as critique; power and studying up.

Readings:

- Clifford, J. 1983. On Ethnographic Authority. *Representations*, 1(2), 118-146.
- Fine, G. 1993. Ten Lies of Ethnography: Moral Dilemmas of Field Research. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 22(3), 267-294.
- Geertz, C. 1990. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford.
- Marcus, G. 1995. Ethnography In/Of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, 95-117.
- Nader, L. 1982. Up the Anthropologist: Perspectives Gained from Studying Up. In Hymes, D. (ed), *Reinventing Anthropology*. New York: Pantheon.

Other Useful Texts

Agar, M. 1996. *The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography*. Academic Press.

Bernard, R. 2001. *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Altamira Press.

Clifford, J. and Marcus, G. 1986. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. University of California Press.

Cresswell, J. 1998. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions*. Sage.

Emerson, R. (ed.) 2001. *Contemporary Field Research: Perspectives and Formulations*. Waveland Press.

Feldman, M. 1995. *Strategies of Interpreting Qualitative Data*. Sage.

Fetterman, D. 1997. *Ethnography: Step-by-Step*. Sage.

Van Maanen, J. 1988. *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. Chicago.