GEOG 625: Qualitative Methods

Instructor: Dr. Emily Reid-Musson
Lecture times: Mondays 2:30 – 5:20
Class location: EV3 3406
Office hours: Mondays 1-2
Office location: EV1 235
Contact: eredmusson@uwaterloo.ca
Course information: Learn

Course description

This course investigates the range of qualitative research methods employed by geographers and to explore the methodological justifications (philosophical or theoretical underpinnings) for using this type of research approach. Qualitative methods attempt to interpret meaning as opposed to purely measuring phenomena. The focus of qualitative research is not purely descriptive measurement and prediction of phenomena, as offered by statistical description/analysis, but is more attuned to examining subjective understandings and the interpretation of meaning (hermeneutics). This course will examine and evaluate the range of research tools comprising qualitative methods including: different interviewing methods, participant observation, ethnography, case study methods and discourse analysis. It will also engage with theoretical debates and philosophical approaches that underpin qualitative research.

Course Objectives

1. Develop practical competence with regard to the selection and use of a range of qualitative research methods in geographical research.
2. Build awareness of the different philosophical arguments that structure the debate regarding qualitative research and its benefits to the research process and product.
3. Integrate the actual practice of research with a critical analysis of how the research process informs the production of knowledge.
4. Explore the range of qualitative research methods available for use in geography and environmental studies research.
5. Develop specific skill sets with regard to the selection and use of appropriate research methods in line with specific research questions.
6. Contrast the comparative benefits and limitations of different research methods.
7. Encourage constructive and regular student contribution to class.
8. Develop students’ critical comprehension of research design, data collection
and interpretation

Readings


An additional journal article will be provided to the class each week, selected by students to correspond with weekly presentations (discussed below).

Weekly article selections and student presentations

Each week, chapter readings will be supplemented by additional readings selected by a student. Student will give a critical analysis presentation to the class on the textbook chapter and selected article, and prompt discussion. The supplemental readings should illustrate, enrich and/or complement and contrast the particular methods and issues explored in the textbook. Please note the following steps and organize your schedule to ensure presentations go smoothly:

- **Presentation sign-up – beginning of the term:** As a group, students will sign up for weekly presentations.

- **Student article selections – at least two weeks prior to presentations:**
  - Readings will be from peer reviewed journals or books, and will be from geography or geography related journals but written by geographers. The selected reading should enrich our understanding of the textbook chapter assigned that week. Presenters will contact the instructor to discuss their selections prior to selecting and circulating an article. If necessary, presenters will meet with the instructor to discuss their selections and/or presentations.

- **Posting article selections to the class – at least a week prior to the presentation:** Once you have discussed and chosen the selected article, please circulate the article to the class on LEARN in advance, to give your classmates the time to complete and reflect on the reading.

- **Presentations:** Your presentations will be a critical analysis of the chapter in light of the selected reading. Critical analysis might include:
  - A discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the chapter in light of the selected reading(s).
  - A critical assessment might also highlight vital factors that are missing from the textbook, and explain how (according to your opinion), the inclusion of such factors might improve our knowledge.
- Critical observations might also highlight assumptions or positions evident in the textbook. A critical review does not necessarily have to be negative, but it must contextualize the material in a broader intellectual framework.
- Your presentation should not be a descriptive recap of what is discussed in the chapter and article.

These activities will be assessed as part of each student’s contribution.

[need critical review support material here!!]

Assignments and grading

Students will be assessed

| Participation and self-evaluation | 30% | This is an advanced discussion-based seminar. You will complete pre-assigned readings in order to engage with your peers, instructor and guests actively and constructively in each class. You will lead one weekly seminar. At the end of the course, students will submit a reflection that assesses how they contributed to the course learning experience. In your reflections, you are expected to comment on your input with regard to your class presentation, the additional readings you presented, and your contribution to in-class discussion. These comments will be used in conjunction with the instructor’s observations on how students contributed to the overall constructive learning experience developed in the class. Self-evaluations will be 2 pages maximum and are due on Wednesday, April 4. |
| Class presentation | 30% | This will be a presentation of your final paper, to be held over the final two classes, to be held March 26 and April 2. We will determine the presentation schedule in our first class meeting in January. |
| Final paper | 40% | Due Wednesday, April 4. Students will submit a final paper that addresses the research methods or a particular aspect of research methods that they will consider using in their own research. The idea is that this paper can form a draft of your methods chapter in |
your final thesis, dissertation, or research masters paper. The paper will be 5,000 words maximum and will address:

1. A description of the research problem and research questions.
2. A description of the particular method(s) and methodological approach (and theoretical perspective/s) you have selected for your research and an explanation for their relevance.
3. Critical literature review for the particular method and methodological approach selected.
4. A timeline for the proposed research.
Week by week schedule

Assigned readings should be completed before the class. Further guest speakers and weekly student-selected articles TBD.
Weekly topics may change depending on student interests.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part I: Ethics and epistemologies in qualitative geography methods</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>January 8: Introduction to Qualitative Methods</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Assigned reading: Textbook chapter 1</td>
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<td>Prior to our first class, please think of an article (or monograph) that is influential to your own current research. Consider the following: <em>What are the research questions, theoretical frameworks, and methods? How are each of these elements related? Why are the research important and compelling to you?</em> Please be prepared to share your reflections with the class.</td>
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<td><strong>January 15: Research Ethics in Qualitative Geography Research</strong></td>
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<td>Assigned reading: Textbook chapter 2</td>
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<td>Guest speaker: TBD, Research Ethics, University of Waterloo</td>
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<td>Optional reading:</td>
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<td><strong>January 22: Ethics, power and positionality</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Assigned reading: Textbook chapters 3-4</td>
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<td>Optional reading:</td>
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<td><strong>January 29: Writing a research proposal</strong></td>
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<td>Assigned reading: Textbook ch. 5</td>
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Optional reading:

**Part II: Tools and strategies in qualitative geography research**

**February 5: Interviews and focus groups**

Assigned reading: Textbook ch. 8 and 10

Optional reading:

**February 12: Ethnography and observation**

Assigned readings: Textbook ch. 16

**February 19: Family Day/Reading Break – No class**

**February 26: Textual, media and discourse analysis**

Assigned readings: Textbook ch. 11 and 14

Optional reading:

**March 5: Topic TBD**

This week is reserved for special topics based on student interests. Students will provide updates on their paper writing plans and progress.

Guest speaker: Giving effective presentations
Note: You are encouraged to contact me during office hours to discuss your progress on your final paper. You may want to share an outline or proposal, although this is optional.

### Part III: Interpreting, Analyzing, and Communicating

#### March 12: Coding

Assigned reading: Textbook ch. 18


#### March 19: Evaluating the quality of qualitative research

Assigned reading: Textbook ch. 19

Optional reading:


#### March 26: Class presentations

#### April 2: Class presentations

Additional topics:

- Affect-based, non-representational, and performative research
- Visual methodologies
- Community and participant mapping
- Mobile methodologies
- Mixed methods (qualitative-quantitative research)