

ETC 612: Seminar in Technical Communication (Qualitative Research Methods)

T 10-11, Eder 212F

Dr. Michael Charlton, EFLJ, Eder 212F

Office Hours: M 2:00-3:30

T 11:00-12:30

W 12:00-1:00

F 12:00-1:00

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Course Description:

This introduction to the major methods of qualitative research in professional writing studies at the graduate level includes discussion of ethnographic approaches such as case studies and participant observation, surveying, interviewing, and archival/historical research. Related topics include formulating a researchable question, choosing an appropriate research method, reviewing the relevant literature, designing and revising research proposals, understanding ethical issues such as informed consent, anticipating major administrative and pragmatic problems in conducting research, and analyzing and reporting research findings.

Required Materials:

Hughes and Hayhoe, *A Research Primer for Technical Communication*

Marshall and Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research, 4th ed.*

Johnson-Eilola and Selber, *Central Works in Technical Communication*

Major Assignments:

In addition to reading assignments intended to give you a background on qualitative research in technical communication (including major theoretical issues and debates) and to introduce you to a few classic studies in the field, there are four major assignments in this course: a series of weekly responses, the topic proposal, the literature review, and the final research design.

For the first five weeks of class, you will write a one-page weekly response. In most cases, these responses will be focused not so much on summarizing or analyzing the weekly reading assignments but on making our first tentative steps into research (for example, by reviewing library holdings in our field, by writing an abstract, etc.). Please see the assignment schedule for details. As a group, these responses will be worth twenty percent of the final grade.

The topic proposal will be a two-page letter suggesting a researchable question in technical communication. It should include a clearly defined research question, a suggestion of what research method might be most appropriate to this question and why, and a justification for why this research might be significant (such as who might be interested in the results, what debates or queries it might help to further, and where such results could be published or presented). This topic proposal will be worth twenty percent of the final grade.

After the topic proposal has been submitted and approved, you will conduct a literature review. This ten page bibliographic essay should cite at least fifteen sources from relevant and legitimate areas in the field (such as peer-reviewed journals, books, dissertations, conference proceedings, and monographs). In this essay, you will trace what research has been done in the past five to ten years in close relation to the topic you have proposed. Major issues addressed in the literature review should include the extent of research on this topic, a summary of each source, the research methods employed, significant findings from these studies, significant gaps in the research and/or flaws in the design, implementation, or analysis of these studies, and recommendations for further study. This literature review will be worth thirty percent of the final grade.

The final research design will be a formal research proposal following appropriate models (models will be provided). This design will incorporate the revised topic proposal and literature review as two of its sections. In this proposal, you will outline a research project which could be reasonably completed for inclusion in a MA thesis or other terminal graduate project such as a peer-reviewed journal article.

This proposal should include an introduction outlining the basic aims of this study and your central research question (probably reworked from the topic proposal), a background section outlining how you arrived at this question, a literature review demonstrating your familiarity with research on this question, a justification section explaining the relevance of this study to the field, a methodology section justifying and explaining your choice of research methods, a central section describing the research project itself (including any instruments such as surveys or interview questions, any relevant costs and/or pragmatic concerns such as time, materials, and preparation, and a note as to how results will be compiled, analyzed, and published), an ethics section dealing with any possible ethical or legal concerns with your research, a conclusion “selling” your project to the reader, and any relevant appendices.

This final and central project will be worth thirty percent of the final grade. Due to time constraints, we will not have time to complete the research itself (you may, if you wish, try to follow this research project into your thesis work). Research designs will be evaluated on a number of factors, such as the quality of your background reading and analysis, the practicality and thoroughness of your research plan, and the polish and presentation of your final product.

All three of these final projects will be done in a staggered process, so that drafts of different components of each will be due before the final draft.

Assignments are due at the beginning of class. No late work will be accepted.

The class will use a normal grading scale: A (90-100%); B (80-89%); C (70-79%); D (60-69%); F (0-59%).

Attendance:

Obviously, as an independent study and as a seminar at the graduate level, your attendance is mandatory at each session. Failure to turn up for any session without at first notifying me will severely hurt your grade, as will any significant problems with tardiness, etc. I assume this will not be a problem.

Academic Honesty:

Academic honesty is required in all academic endeavors. Violations of academic honesty include any instance of plagiarism, cheating, seeking credit for another’s work, falsifying documents or academic records, or any other fraudulent activity. Violations of academic honesty may result in a failing grade on the assignment, failure in the course, or expulsion from the University. When a student’s grade has been affected, violations of academic honesty will be reported to the Provost or designated representative on the Academic Honesty Violation Report forms.

Please see the 2009-10 Student Handbook for specific activities identified as violations of this policy and the student due process procedure. This handbook is also available online at <http://www.missouriwestern.edu/handbook/index.pdf>

Special Needs:

Any student who has a special need or disability that might affect performance in this course should contact the appropriate MWSU coordinator for assistance. Also, let me know immediately so that arrangements can be made to make sure your needs are met as quickly and completely as possible.

Final Notes:

Please visit me in my office. If you cannot come by during my posted office hours, please make an appointment. Again, as an independent study and as a seminar at the graduate level, a lot of the responsibility for success here depends on you. Please ask questions. Please tell me if you are having problems or concerns with some of the material or assignments. In many ways, this seminar has been formulated not as a lecture or even as a traditional seminar but as a workshop in which we apply what we have discussed and analyzed in the first part of the semester to a practical product. This workshop will work best if we’re talking back and forth to each other about any questions or concerns.

Assignment Schedule:

Unless otherwise noted, all titles in quotation marks refer to articles in *Central Works in Technical Communication*. All assignments are tentative and subject to change.

Week 1: 8/25 – Introductions: Why Research?

Homework Assignments: Marshall and Rossman, Chapter 1

Hughes and Hayhoe, Chapters 1 and 2

Miller, “A Humanistic Rationale for Technical Writing”

Thralls and Blyler, “The Social Perspective and Professional Communication”

Lay, “Feminist Theory and the Redefinition of Technical Communication”

Response #1: We’re going to start with a fairly straightforward bibliographic assignment. Using the Missouri Western State University library, I want you to find and cite (using APA style) each of the following: a technical writing textbook, two books or monographs on technical writing, and two articles in a technical writing journal. Using the Web (and, again, APA conventions), find and cite a thesis or dissertation on technical writing, a professional technical writing website (such as a tech writing organization), and the website for a college course in qualitative research. You don’t need to summarize or read all of these sources; locating and citing them will be your focus here.

Week 2: 9/1 – What is Qualitative Research? **RESPONSE #1 DUE**

Homework Assignments: Hughes and Hayhoe, Chapters 3 and 9

Herndl, “Teaching Discourse and Reproducing Culture”

Charney, “Empiricism is Not a Four-Letter Word”

Sullivan and Porter, “On Theory, Practice, and Method”

Response #2: Now that you have found and cited sources, I want you to compose an abstract for me. Go back to one of the articles we have read (or use one of the technical writing articles you located in the previous assignment) and compose a one-paragraph abstract for this article touching on its main focus, methods, findings, and other relevant information. (What if it already has an abstract, you ask? Compose your own, trying as far as possible to stay away from the language and phrasing of the original, and compare the two: trust me, it’s an interesting experiment.) We will discuss appropriate models and aims for abstracts.

Week 3: 9/8 – Evaluating Qualitative Research **RESPONSE #2 DUE**

Homework Assignments: Hughes and Hayhoe, Chapters 5, 6, and 10

Selber, “Beyond Skill Building”

Rude, “The Report for Decision Making”

Blyler, “Taking a Political Turn”

Response #3: We have already discussed finding, citing, and abstracting sources. Now I want to look at critiquing a source. Consider Selber’s “Beyond Skill Building” as your focus here. First, cite him in APA format (as an essay in an anthology). Second, write a one-paragraph abstract of Selber’s article. Third, write a paragraph evaluating this as a piece of research. What do you think the strengths and weaknesses of Selber’s research designs are? Do you think the data he collected justify his suggestions and conclusions? Would you consider this a good example of research in technical communication? Why or why not?

Week 4: 9/15 – Research Methods: Surveys and Questionnaires **RESPONSE #3 DUE**

Homework Assignments: Hughes and Hayhoe, Chapter 4

Johnson, “Audience Involved”

Paradis, “Text and Action”

Mirel, “Writing and Database Technology”

Barton and Barton, “Ideology and the Map”

Bernhardt, “The Shape of Text to Come”

Response #4: I want to get a little more hands-on here. You’re going to conduct two surveys. Both of these surveys will focus on a topic relevant to student life here at Western (for example, cafeteria food, book costs, student loan debt, computer lab usage, etc.). You will then conduct these surveys by having eight to ten randomly selected students fill one of them out (don’t overlap – if someone takes one survey, s/he should not take the other). One survey will be multiple choice and use a Likert Scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree Nor Disagree, Agree, Strongly

Agree). The other survey will be open-ended, asking nearly identical questions but not offering any example answers or preferences to be selected.

For example:

Likert Scale Question: I feel that book costs at Western are too high. Circle one: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree Nor Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree

Open-Ended Question: Do you feel that book costs at Western are too high?

Once you have done this, I want you to write a paragraph comparing the two surveys. Do you feel that one survey gave you clearer data? Why or why not? Do you feel that one survey gave you more honest opinions? Why or why not? Was either survey easier to administer and/or collect results for? Why or why not? Do you have any ethical concerns with your survey? Why or why not?

Week 5: 9/22 – Research Methods: Usability Testing **RESPONSE #4 DUE**

Homework Assignments: Hughes and Hayhoe, Chapters 7 and 8

Allen et al, “What Experienced Collaborators Say”

Bosley, “Cross-Cultural Collaboration”

Brasseur, “Contesting the Objectivist Paradigm”

Sullivan, “Political-Ethical Implications of Defining Tech Comm”

Response #5: You have now found and cited sources, wrote an abstract for a source, evaluated a source, and even conducted your own small study. Now I want you to do something crucial to the literature review: synthesize more than one source. Go back to the Johnson, Paradis, Mirel, and Barton and Barton articles read for last week. I would suggest that, as different as these four articles are, they share certain commonalities in terms of focus, research, and conclusions. Write a short, one-to-two paragraph response in which you identify what these commonalities are. If you wanted to argue that these are all essays on the same basic topic, what is that topic? How are their findings similar and different? How are their methods similar and different? So far, this is essentially a sophisticated comparison/contrast. I want you to go a little further. After reading and reviewing these four articles, what ideas for further research might you have on their common topic? What research might you like to see done in this vein and why? Are there any major gaps in the research? Are there any major research problems that they all (or at least most of them) share?

Week 6: 9/29 – Research Methods: Interviews and Observation **RESPONSE #5 DUE**

Homework Assignments: Marshall and Rossman, Chapters 2 and 3

Driskill, “Understanding the Writing Context in Organizations”

Selzer,

“The Composing Processes of an Engineer”

Doheny-Farina, “Writing in an Emerging Organization”

Winsor, “Engineering Writing/Writing Engineering”

Harrison, “Frameworks for the Study of Writing”

Three possible topics for your research [You can write single sentences: “I want to study (blank) because of (blank)” – we’re looking for broad interests here, perhaps inspired by the readings – methods and other specifics can come later]

Week 7: 10/6 – Research Methods: Case Studies

Homework Assignments: Marshall and Rossman, Chapters 4 and 5

Connors, “The Rise of Technical Writing Instruction in America”

Rutter, “History, Rhetoric, and Humanism”

Durack, “Gender, Technology, and the History of Tech Comm”

Katz, “The Ethic of Expediency”

Topic Proposal Due

Week 8: 10/13 – Research Methods: Archival and Historical Research **TOPIC PROPOSAL DUE**

Homework Assignments: Marshall and Rossman, Chapters 6 and 7; read Example Literature Review and bring to session

Week 9: 10/20 – Analyzing a Literature Review

Homework Assignments: Find and summarize five sources for the literature review; bring your summaries and copies

of your sources

Week 10: 10/27 – Constructing a Literature Review

Homework Assignments: Literature Review Due

Week 11: 11/3 – Creating a Research Design (Research Design Model Critique) **LITERATURE REVIEW DUE**

Homework Assignments: Draft introduction and background sections and bring to session

Week 12: 11/10 – Articulating and Justifying Methods

Homework Assignments: Draft methodology and justification sections and bring to session

Week 13: 11/17 – Planning for Data Collection and Analysis

Homework Assignments: Draft research plan and instruments and bring to session

Week 14: 11/24 – Ethical Concerns; “Selling” the Design

Homework Assignments: Final Research Design Due

Week 15: 12/1 – Critiquing a Research Design **FINAL RESEARCH DESIGN DUE**