

**Syllabus EDRS 812: Qualitative Methods in Educational Research**  
**George Mason University**  
**Spring 2004**

Instructor: Jenny Gordon  
Office: Robinson A 322  
Office hours: By appointment  
Phone: 703-993-3794  
Email: jgordon5@gmu.edu

Class meeting: Time: Thursdays 4:30-7:10  
Location: PE 204

**Course Goals**

1. To understand the important characteristics of qualitative research and the ways in which this approach differs from other approaches to research
2. To understand the assumptions embodied in qualitative research and the implications of these assumptions for doing and evaluating qualitative studies
3. To design and carry out a small-scale qualitative study
4. To communicate (both orally and in writing) the goals, conceptual framework, process, and results of such a study

**Course Structure**

There are four main components of the course:

1. A **class meeting** once a week. The first part of each class will be devoted to discussions and class activities about topics key to qualitative inquiry.
2. The second part of each class will be structured as a **consultation group** for your research project. Students will lead discussions on their projects and receive advice from me and their peers.
3. **Assigned readings**. These readings are an essential part of the course. They provide the necessary preparation for class discussion and activities. In addition they introduce important aspects of qualitative research that there simply isn't time to discuss in depth in class.
4. An individual **qualitative research project**. Guidelines for this project are provided below.

## Course Readings

### ***Required Texts***

Becker, H. S. (1986). *Writing for social scientists*. Chicago: Chicago University Press:

Glesne, C. (1999). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman

Merriam, S. and Associates. (2003). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis*. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass.

Weiss, R. S. (1994). *Learning from strangers: The art and method of qualitative interview studies*. New York: The Free Press.

Selected readings on electronic reserves

### ***Recommended Texts***

Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (1995). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Maxwell, J. A. (1996). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

Wolcott, H. F., (1994). *Transforming qualitative data: Description, analysis, and interpretation*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

## Written Assignments

### ***Research Project***

The final written assignment for the course is a 22-26 page paper that describes your fieldwork process and results and represents a major part of the work of this course. The range of possible projects that you can conduct is extremely broad. The main requirement is that the project has to be genuinely qualitative in nature. (We will discuss in detail what this means in class.) Almost any setting, or set of informants, is a potential source of data for your research, including a setting or topic with which you have a prior role or involvement. An initial prospectus for your project is due the second week of the course. I will give you feedback on your ideas, and if I see any potential problems, we may need to meet to discuss these issues to make sure that you have a feasible project.

There are five additional specific requirements for your research project:

1. **No covert research.** This is 1) ethically problematic, 2) too difficult to manage for someone just beginning to learn qualitative research, 3) restricts your research options, and 4) doesn't allow you to learn the key skill of negotiation with those you

study. You must have the informed consent of the participants in your research. We will discuss this in more detail in preparing your proposal for Human Subjects approval, which you will need before beginning to collect data.

2. **No comparative studies.** Your main research question can't be anything of the form "What is the difference between . . .?", whether this is a difference between two groups or settings or between two categories of people. While comparative studies are a legitimate and important form of qualitative research, they are not a good way to learn how to do qualitative research. Comparison is likely to push you toward more quantitative questions and modes of thinking, reduce the depth of understanding you can gain of one group, setting, or category, and make it more difficult for you to learn what is essential in qualitative research. In general, a course project involving observation should be limited to a single setting.
3. **A minimum 5 hours of fieldwork** that should incorporate some hours of observation and some hours of interviewing (the breakdown will depend on your study) in a single setting. You will need to record your interviews (using either audiotape or videotape), and to transcribe your interview material. Normally, this will involve interviewing several participants; in special circumstances, it may be possible to work with a single participant. You will need to do several hours of observations of your setting, taking written notes, and to reorganize, rewrite, and expand your rough notes to make them usable for analysis. Normally, this will involve separate observation periods. Typed copies of your interview transcripts or fieldnotes must be handed in with your final report.
4. **Data collection must take place through a substantial part of the semester.** You can't rely on previously collected data, or do only a single round of observations or interviews in a brief period (1 week or less). You need to be able to learn from your experiences, and to make corrections to your study design and techniques as you proceed.
5. **You will need to share your work for feedback.** Any arrangements that you make with participants in your study must make it clear that fieldnotes and interview transcripts (with names deleted if necessary) will be discussed in class. (Class members will be required to respect the confidentiality of this information; this is discussed in a separate handout on class participation.) Sharing your work in class is the only way that I can really assess the actual process of your research, and is also an important part of that process. You can't do the work of this class in isolation.

If you are studying a setting where you have a prior role, or are interviewing people with whom you have a prior relationship, you need to **discuss with me the special issues that this raises**, and will need to deal with these issues in your final report. You are free to use as a setting for your research project the same site that you are using in work for another course or for an internship. However, if you do this, the amount of work involved must be appropriate for the total amount of credit--normally, you can't use the same work (e.g., turning in the same report) to get credit for both courses. In any case, if you are using the work to satisfy two different courses or requirements, you **must**

**submit, both to me and to the other instructor or supervisor, a written description of how you will use your work in this setting to satisfy the requirements of both courses, and get our signatures indicating our approval of your plans.**

Further project guidelines will be provided as the semester progresses.

### ***Research Project Memos***

A number of short written assignments reporting on your research project will be required during the course. These assignments will be not be graded but will be returned to you with my comments to give you feedback on key aspects of your project. Most of these assignments are intended as preliminary drafts of things that, with revision, can be incorporated in your final project report.

### **Grading**

If you don't complete the course assignments and project on time, you won't be able to participate adequately in class and support-group discussions, and you won't get as much out of the course. This also creates problems for me in giving you timely feedback on your work. For these reasons, **late assignments will not be accepted** without a compelling justification and my prior consent.

Grading will be based primarily (80%) on your final project report, and secondarily (20%) on class participation. The short assignments during the course, though required, are ungraded; their purpose is to give you feedback on what will become parts of your final project report. The guidelines for the final report are fairly detailed about what the report needs to cover and how this will be evaluated. Class participation will be assessed not on how brilliantly or how often you speak, but primarily on how helpful you are to others in the class, and how well you take account of feedback from others; attendance will be a factor in this part of the grade. Your grade for the course is essentially a measure of how well I believe you have achieved the course goals, based on the evidence you provide in your assignments, report, and class contributions. The passing grades given in the course are A+, A, A-, B+, B, and B-. (Because doctoral students are required to maintain a 3.0 grade point average, a B-, though technically a “passing” grade, must be balanced by a B+ or higher grade in another course.) If you receive a grade of B+ or lower on the final report, you may rewrite the report to raise your grade, and your final grade on the report will be the average of the initial grade and the grade on the revised report.

### **University Policies**

#### ***George Mason University Honor Code:***

To promote a stronger sense of mutual responsibility, respect, trust, and fairness among all members of George Mason University and with the desire for greater academic and personal achievement, we, the members of George Mason University, have set forth the

following code of honor. Any individual who is caught in the act of cheating, attempting to cheat, plagiarizing, or stealing will be brought forth before a council of their peers. In the event that the individual is found guilty, he or she will be punished accordingly. For further information, please refer to the University Catalog or Website at [www.gmu.edu](http://www.gmu.edu). Code in the University catalog can be found online at <http://www.gmu.edu/facstaff/handbook/aD.html>.

***George Mason University Policy on Disabilities:***

This syllabus is subject to change based on the needs of the class. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in the series, programs, or activities of all State and local Governments. Under ADA a disability is defined as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity such as: learning, working, walking, speaking, hearing, breathing, and/or taking care of oneself. If a student has a disability and needs course adaptations or accommodations because of that disability, it must be established with the faculty, in writing, at the beginning of the semester so arrangements can be made. Please call the Disability Resource Center for required documentation (703-993-2474). The Disability Resource Center website is at <http://www.gmu.edu/student/drc/>

## Course Calendar

- January 22 Introduction to the course
- January 29 The nature of qualitative research  
*Assigned Readings: Glesne, Chapter 1 and 2; Merriam, Chapters 1 and 2.*  
**Written assignment: Project Idea Memo due**  
Recommended Readings: Maxwell, Chapter 1.
- February 5 Generating questions and designing your study: Participant selection, research relationships, and ethics  
*Readings: Glesne, Chapter 5 and 6; Merriam, Chapters 5 and 11*
- February 12 Observation  
*Readings: Glesne, Chapter 3; Merriam, 9 and 10*  
**Written Assignment: HSRB Approval Form**
- February 19 Observation  
*Readings: Emerson, Fretz & Shaw (electronic reserves), Chapters 1 and 2; Becker, Chapter 2*  
**Written Assignment: Typed transcript from class observation exercise**
- February 26 Interviewing  
*Glesne, Chapter 4; Weiss, Chapters 1-5.*
- March 4 Interviewing  
*Readings: Merriam, Chapter 14. Reread Merriam, Chapter 10*
- March 11 **SPRING BREAK NO CLASS**
- March 18 Focusing your study  
*Readings: Becker, Chapter 8; Reread Merriam, Chapters 5 and 9*  
**Written Assignment: Researcher Identity Memo**  
Recommended Readings: Maxwell Chapters 2-4
- March 25 Analyzing your data  
*Readings: Glesne, Chapter 7; Weiss, Chapter 6; Merriam, Chapters 11 and 14*  
**Written Assignment: Research Relationship and Data Collection Memo due**
- April 1 Analyzing your data  
*Readings: Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, (electronic reserves) Chapter 6; Merriam, 5 and 10*

Recommended Readings Wolcott (electronic reserves) Chapters 1 &2;  
Maxwell, pages 77-81

- April 8 Writing up your study  
*Readings: Glesne, Chapter 8; Weiss, Chapter 7; Becker, Chapters 3 and 4*  
**Written Assignment: Data Analysis and Conclusions Memo**
- April 15 American Educational Research Association No class meeting  
Work on Project Drafts
- April 22 Writing and rewriting  
*Readings: Glesne, Chapter 9; Becker, Chapters 6 and 7; Wolcott (electronic reserves)*  
**Written Assignment: paper draft due to partner**
- April 29 Resonance and Trustworthiness  
*Readings: Merriam, Chapters 9 and 10*  
**Written Assignment: Provide written feedback to partner**  
Recommended Readings: Maxwell, Chapter 6
- May 6 Project presentations  
**Written Assignment: Final papers due**

## Written Assignment Guidelines

### *Research Project Memos*

#### **1) Idea Memo Guidelines**

This assignment is a brief “idea memo” on what you are thinking of doing for your course research project. It has two purposes. First, it is an exercise in thinking systematically about your plans for the project, for your own benefit; it is a “memo” in the sense in which qualitative researchers use this term (Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design*, Chapter 1). I will give you feedback on ways that you might use this sort of writing more effectively in this course. Second, it is a way of communicating with me about your intentions for your project. It will be the starting point for an ongoing dialogue (both with me and with the rest of the class) about your project. The memo should give a good sense of what you want to do and why, and indicate what you think are the advantages and potential disadvantages of this plan.

I want to emphasize that this assignment, like the other memo assignments for this course, is a process paper. You do not have to have a fully developed plan for your course project in order to do this assignment. Instead, you should use it to write about, and reflect on, your current thinking about your project. I will return the memo to you with my questions and suggestions by the next class. You will have an opportunity to reflect on some of these issues in more depth in subsequent memos on your researcher identity, and on your research relationships with your participants.

You should read Glesne, *Becoming Qualitative Researchers*, Chapter 2 before writing this memo, since these raise some important issues for selecting a topic and setting for your project. Although the memo does not commit you to anything, it will be to your advantage to have thought through your plans as much as you can at this point before getting my feedback on these.

There are three main points that you should address in the memo:

1. What is the topic (problem, issue, question, situation) that you want to investigate? What do you want to learn about this topic by doing this study? If you are thinking of doing an observational study, what sort of setting would you want to observe; for an interview study, what sort of people would you want to interview? Do you have an actual site or set of interviewees in mind? (about 2 pages.)
2. Why have you selected this topic and setting or interviewees? Be explicit (but brief) about any important personal or practical reasons you have, as well as your professional and scholarly interests; if I don't know what these are, I can't give you good feedback on their possible consequences. (about 1.5 pages.)
3. What potential difficulties (personal, practical, conceptual, or methodological) do you foresee in doing this project? How do you think you could deal with these? (about 1.5 pages.)

Although you don't need to discuss this in the memo, you should think about possible alternative settings and participants for your proposed project, in case your first choice doesn't work out.

The memo should be about 5 pages in double-spaced, 12-point font. It is due in class on **January 29**.

## **2) Guidelines for HSRB Application Assignment**

There are two main purposes of this assignment. The first (and less important) purpose is for you to gain experience preparing an application to the Human Subjects Review Board, which you will need to do for your dissertation. The second is for you to develop a strategy for dealing with the ethical issues that your project may encounter. While this assignment is somewhat more formal in presentation than the later memo assignments, it does not commit you to anything. You should take into account the feedback I give you on this assignment, and the experiences you have with ethical issues in doing the project, in your write-up of these issues in your final report.

The required forms are available on GMU's web site at:  
<http://www.gmu.edu/pubs/osp/hsreviewprocess.htm>

Filling out the first page of the HSRB application isn't necessary for this assignment, since it's simply form-completion. The required components are the Abstract, Protocol, and Informed Consent document; you don't need to include your interview guide (although you can, if you want feedback on this) or any approval documentation. Details on each of the required parts are provided below

1. The Abstract can be quite short, as long as it adequately addresses the four points that are included. (One-half to 1 page.)
2. The Protocol is the main part of the assignment. This asks you to describe how you will recruit participants, how you will obtain their informed consent, what they will be asked to do, any potential benefits or risks to them, and how the confidentiality of the data will be maintained. Points 1-3 and 6-9 will need to be addressed for all projects; the others may be necessary for some projects. (About 1.5 to 2 pages.)
3. The Informed Consent document, for this course project, is simply a description of what you will give or tell participants about the issues described in the Protocol. For a course project, you do not need to get signed consent. (About 1 page.)

The assignment should be about 3-4 typed in double-spaced pages, 12-point font. It is due **February 12**.

## **3) Guidelines for Researcher Identity Memo**

The purpose of this memo is to help you examine your background, experience, assumptions, feelings, and values as they relate to your research, and to discover what

resources and potential concerns your identity and experience may create. What prior connections (social and intellectual) do you have to the topics, people, or settings you plan to study? How do you think and feel about these topics, people, or settings? What assumptions are you making, consciously or unconsciously, about these? What do you want to learn by doing this study?

Researchers frequently make a sharp separation between their research and the rest of their lives. This practice is harmful to good research in two main ways. First, it creates the illusion that research takes place in a sterile, "objective" environment, subject only to rational and impersonal motives and decisions. This obscures the actual motives, assumptions, and agendas that researchers have, and leads them to ignore the influence of these on their research process and conclusions. It also leads researchers to hide their actual motives and practices when they don't conform to this ideal, and contributes to a kind of "impostor syndrome" in which each researcher feels that only he or she is failing to live up to the goal of scientific neutrality and disinterest. Second, and even more damaging, this separation cuts the researcher off from a major source of insights, questions, and practical guidance in conducting the research. For more on this issue, see Maxwell, pp. 27-29.

The goal of this assignment is not to write a general account of your background and experiences. Instead, describe specifically those experiences, and the beliefs, emotions, and motives that emerged from them, that have most directly influenced your planned research project, and specifically discuss how these have informed and influenced your research. See Glesne, *Becoming Qualitative Researchers*, pp. 105-112 not as a model to mechanically follow, but as an illustration of the kind of thinking that this memo requires. Since you are just starting your project, you can't be as detailed or confident in your conclusions as Glesne is, but try to aim for this sort of exploration of how your identity could affect your study. For additional discussion and examples of ways to think about this assignment, see Maxwell, pp. 15-19, 22-23, & 27-31, and the exercises on pp. 24 & 46.

I suggest that you begin working on this memo by "brainstorming" whatever comes to mind when you think about your prior experiences that may relate to your site or topic, and jot these down without immediately trying to organize or analyze them. Then, try to identify the issues most likely to be important in your research, think about the implications of these, and organize your reflections.

Your memo should address the following points. Be as specific as you can.

1. What prior experiences have you had that are relevant to your topic or setting? What assumptions about your topic or setting have resulted from these experiences? How have these shaped your decision to choose this topic, and the way you are approaching this project? (About 2 pages.)
2. What questions do you want to answer by doing this study? What do you already believe or expect about the answers to your questions, and why? How have your experiences shaped these questions, beliefs, and expectations? (About 2 pages.)

3. What potential advantages do you think the beliefs and experiences that you described create for your study? What potential disadvantages do you think these may create for you, and how might you deal with these? (About 1 page.)

The memo should be about 5 typed, double-spaced pages. It is due **March 18**.

#### **4) Guidelines for Research Relationship and Data Collection Memo**

The purpose of this assignment is for you to describe and reflect on your data collection activities to this point in your project. You should have at least started doing interviews and observations when you write this, so you'll have something to reflect on.

You should briefly describe and comment on what you have done in each of these three areas:

1. How and why did you choose your research setting and/or the people you have interviewed or plan to interview? What would you do differently if you were to do the study over? Why? (About 1 to 1.5 pages.)
2. What relationships have you established with the participants in your study or setting? How did these relationships develop? How were they influenced by any prior connections or other relationships that you had with this setting or participants? What impact have they had on your project? Are there changes in these relationships that you want to try to make in the remainder of the study? (About 1.5 to 2 pages.)
3. What, specifically, have you done so far to collect data for your study? (This includes interviews, observations, informal conversations, "hanging out", collecting documents, discussions with key informants, and any other source of information about the people or setting you are studying.) How well has this worked? How has it changed your thinking about your topic or setting? What could you do in the rest of the study to improve your data collection strategies and techniques? (About 2 to 3 pages.)

The memo should be about 5-6 typed, double-spaced pages, normal font and margins. It is due **March 25**.

#### **5) Guidelines for Data Analysis and Conclusions Memo**

The purpose of this assignment is for you to think about both the process and results of your data analysis so far. In order to do this assignment, you should have at least started your analysis, including developing an initial list of coding categories and beginning the coding process. There are two parts to the assignment:

1. **Process.** Describe and reflect on the way you are analyzing the data you have collected. What are you actually doing, concretely, to make sense of your data? If someone were watching you do this analysis, what would they see you doing? You should address all of the types of analytic strategies including memos, coding and thematic analysis, connecting or narrative analysis, and displays. Short exhibits, such

as a list of the most important coding categories you've used, examples of analytic memos you've written, or a concept map of links between categories, can be attached as appendices to illustrate and clarify your analysis strategies. (2-3 pages, not counting appendices.)

2. **Results.** Briefly present the most important tentative conclusions you have come to so far about your participants, topic, and setting. What have you learned about the latter from your analysis? Be specific about how your analysis methods have enabled you to generate these conclusions. How do these conclusions relate to your original research questions? How have these questions changed over the course of your project? What additional data collection or analysis do you feel that you need to do to develop these conclusions more fully? (About 3 pages.)

The memo should be about 5-6 typed, double-spaced pages, normal font and margins. It is due **April 8**.

### ***Research Project Report Guidelines and Checklist***

Your final report should describe both the process and the results of your research. In contrast to most academic publications, your description of your methods--how you did the study (points 1-5, below)--is a major part of the report. **However, the results are also important; the results/conclusions portion of your report (point 6, below) should constitute about one-third of the report,** and should clearly present your conclusions and support these with quotes or observations.

The following is a checklist of issues that should be discussed at some point in your report. However, the report should also provide a clear and coherent account of how you did the research and what you learned from it, rather than consisting simply of answers to the questions. I've noted in parentheses which assignments are particularly relevant to each issue.

1. What was the topic or issue that you chose for your study? Why did you choose this—what were your goals in using this topic for your course project? How did your own background and experience (including your knowledge of the literature on your topic) influence this decision? (Idea memo, Researcher Identity memo)
2. What questions about your topic, setting, or participants have you decided to focus on? What theories, beliefs, or expectations did you have about the answers to these? Where did these questions and expectations come from? How did they influence your study? (Idea memo, Researcher Identity memo)
3. How did you choose a setting and/or participants for your study? What prior connections did you have with this setting or the participants? How did you negotiate a research relationship with these participants? How do you think you were perceived by them? How did these relationships (including prior relationships) influence your study? What ethical issues did you encounter in doing your study, and

how did you deal with these? (Research Relationship/Data Collection memo)

4. How did you collect the data for your study? Include a description of your methods. (Research Relationship/Data Collection memo)
5. How did you analyze your data? What specific methods did you use, and what did each contribute to your understanding of your data? (Data Analysis/Conclusions memo)
6. What are the key conclusions or findings about your topic or setting that emerged from your study? How are the things you learned related to one another -- how do they form a coherent story or picture of what you found? (Data Analysis/Conclusions memo)
7. What did you do to assess the validity of your conclusions? What limitations on your conclusions, or plausible alternative interpretations of your data, do you see?
8. Knowing what you now know about qualitative research, if you were to do this study over again, what would you do differently? Why? What were the most important things that you learned about qualitative research by doing this study? How has your research influenced your thinking about your topic?

The report should be between 24 and 28 typed, double-spaced pages using 12-point type. Please attach copies of all interview transcripts and fieldnotes, and your four memo assignments (idea, researcher identity, research relationship/data collection, and data analysis/conclusions) with my comments. The report is due **May 6**.