

TE 931: Introduction to Qualitative Methods in Education Research

Fall 2021

Instructor

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Course Information

Mondays, 4:10-7:00 pm
222 Erickson Hall
Office Hours by Appointment

Course Overview

“Qualitative methods” is a general term describing research practices associated with a variety of substantially different research traditions. This course will engage students in critically analyzing qualitative methodologies for studying pressing problems in education. Special emphasis will be placed on the role of conceptual frameworks in organizing various facets of qualitative inquiry, such as: articulating a researchable problem, the development of research questions, collecting/ analyzing data, creating data analytic techniques, analyzing data, considering threats to validity, and communicating findings in professional genres of scholarship. These facets of qualitative research rarely occur in a linear fashion, and it is important to remember that this class is an introduction to qualitative research. Therefore, you should treat this class as the beginning of your journey as a researcher interested in qualitative methods.

In this course, we do not position qualitative research as *in opposition to* quantitative approaches. Instead, this course provides an overview of several prominent modes of qualitative inquiry that can be used in the study of education. It is important to acknowledge the ways in which quantitative and qualitative methods can be employed jointly in many studies. Most importantly, this course stresses how the purposes a scholar intends to achieve—e.g., theory development, theory refinement, policy study or evaluation, or case description—strongly determine the appropriate form of inquiry.

In the course, we engage with four strands of activity to support successful qualitative inquiry. First, as a seminar, we will read and discuss the empirical work of researchers engaged with systematic inquiry of relevant topics in education. The articles selected display multiple methods geared for the analysis of important problems. In the readings, our concern will be less focused on the results of studies or research programs. Instead, our interest is in reconstructing how authors have structured phases of inquiry in ways that led to a successful (or perhaps not so successful) project.

Second, in conjunction with analysis of these empirical studies, we will analyze papers that focus on the methodological practices themselves. We will use these readings as frames to inform our analysis of the research papers (e.g., application of readings on the case

study method to the study of a paper using case study methods). Third, in conjunction with these reading strands, you will be required to pursue your own mini research project. The project may be used to launch further work (i.e., practicum or comps part 2), or as purely exploratory. Finally, we will conduct research projects within our class that will allow you to try out some of the methods that we discuss. You will keep a research journal to keep track of your experiences.

Course Text

Merriam, S. B. & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons. You can access this book electronically for free from the MSU library by [clicking here](#) or you can purchase a hard copy of the book from book sellers.

In accordance with copyright requirements, links to additional readings are posted on D2L: <https://d2l.msu.edu>

General Course Trajectory

To provide structure for our co-learning and conversations, this class is divided into four overlapping sections:

- Part 1: The first part of the course provides an opportunity to unpack tacit assumptions we each harbor about qualitative research and the role of researchers. Individually and collectively, we will begin to think about, and define, qualitative research. During the few two weeks, we will build a community, and will start our first purposeful planning of qualitative research investigations.
- Part 2: The second part of the course provides a conceptual and historical foundation for qualitative research design. We will discuss how qualitative methodologies can help us name problems, ask research questions, and prepare for data collection and analysis.
- Part 3: The third part of the course provides a basic introduction to various data collection techniques. We will explore basic qualitative techniques that are used broadly, and will note places that you might like to explore further. We will also spend time examining how researchers using qualitative techniques analyze data.
- Part 4: The final part of the has two aims. First, we will explore how to write qualitative research for various audiences, including academic, the public, and policymakers. Included in this part will be discussions of validity and generalizability. Second, we will step back and re-examine qualitative research design from the perspective of partnerships with participants.

Class Expectations

1. This class is a seminar, which means that it is anchored around class discussions. In order for the seminar format to work, you must have completed the readings for the class ahead of time and come prepared to discuss them. Reading academic texts is different than reading a novel or news articles. I am happy to provide you with strategies for unpacking and analyzing academic texts.

2. I expect you to attend class and to participate actively in class discussions and activities. It is especially important that you use your notes on the readings to think about the big ideas of each piece before class so you can contribute to our collaborative analytical efforts. *Please bring the readings to class.* If for any reason you must miss class, please notify me beforehand and ask a classmate to take notes for you.
3. Note that participation does not mean talking a lot. Be mindful of the ways your comments are connecting to the flow of the conversation and what has already been discussed. It is also important that no one dominate class discussion. From time to time, I may ask you to come to class prepared to respond to a particular question that emerged from the readings or to continue a class discussion online. These tasks will also be counted as participation.
4. Assignments must be completed on time. If for any reason an assignment will be late, please talk with me ahead of time. Without permission, all assignments may be graded down by ½ grade for every day late. Incompletes will only be given under unusual circumstances.
5. All of your written work will be held to high standards and should conform to proper rules of grammar, usage, punctuation, and spelling. It may be helpful for you to have someone proofread your paper before you turn it into me. Please use the [latest APA guidelines](#) for citations since that is the standard for our field.

Assignments

A note about assignments: One purpose of this class is to provide you with opportunities to legitimately participate in valued practices of the academic profession. In other words, the purpose of the assignments is to engage in the work required of academics, and you will do so in a safe and collaborative community of peers. Details of the assignments will be discussed in class and posted on D2L.

Assignments will be weighted according to the following grading scheme:

- Tiny research project/paper/presentation: 55%
- Researcher identity memo: 15%
- Researcher journal and toolbox (15%)
- Participation and weekly assignments: 15%

Grades will be assigned according to the following distribution:

- 94-100: 4.0
- 87-93: 3.5
- 80-86: 3.0
- 73-79: 2.5
- 68-72: 2.0

Researcher identity memo (2-4 pages double-spaced)

Due Wednesday, September 22

As a qualitative researcher, it is important to consider your positionality and identity as an

emerging scholar. As we will discuss, who you are and what you value shapes the questions you ask, the data you collect, your analysis, and your communication of the research. For this assignment, you will consider your identity as a researcher by asking and answering questions such as “How did I come to be in a doctoral program at MSU?”, “Why am I in the program”, “What questions matter to me and why”, “Why do I care about some questions and not others”, and beyond.

Mini-research project

This project will be done in phases. You will turn in pieces of the project to me and I will provide formative feedback. You should use this feedback to revise your writing and inform your next steps. I will only grade your final project. I will provide more details and scaffolding for this assignment throughout the course.

1. *Initial Description of Project Idea*

Due: Wednesday, October 6

The project description should not only describe the project idea, but also offer a brief explanation of its significance, drawing on relevant literature, as appropriate. The description should include the focus of investigation (e.g., problematic issue, burning question), type of setting proposed for the study, and plans for obtaining access to that setting. A full review of pertinent literature is not necessary, but it would help to indicate relevant bodies of literature if you have figured that out.

2. *Study Design and Exploratory Data Collection Protocol*

Due: Wednesday, November 3

You will develop a preliminary research plan and/or “instrument” to guide exploratory data collection in a setting you are hoping to investigate. This instrument could be an interview protocol, an observation protocol, a map key that you use when conducting observations, or anything else you might think of when planning.

3. *Final Report and Reflection* (20 pages MAXIMUM, double spaced)

Due Wednesday, December 15

The final paper will build on the previous assignments. In addition, you will describe how you analyzed your data and why you are analyzing the data in particular ways – in other words, link data analysis back to your framing and research questions. You will also have a section for issues of validity that may arise in your study. You will also reflect on this process and what you have learned by engaging in this research.

Researcher Journal and Toolbox

Snippet due Wednesday, December 8

Throughout the course, you will work in small groups to plan and try out several research methods that we discuss. Your small group will be paired with another group to facilitate relationship building and to reflect on both conducting research and being researched. You will keep a research journal in which you discuss how you gathered data, how you analyzed data, and your tentative findings. You will also reflect about the process of gathering data and being researched. Toward the end of class, you will choose a snippet of your journal to share with me.

Participation

The success of this class depends heavily on students to complete all reading assignments and written exercises in a thorough, thoughtful, and critical manner. This will require you to take notes while reading assignments, write questions that arise as you read, and note points of contention as preparation for your active participant in class discussions. There will be little lecturing in the traditional sense, as the course is intended to operate more like a seminar. Therefore, it is vital that students prepare for class by reading the assignments and participate in class discussions and activities. Class participation will constitute 15% of the grade for the course. **NOTE: The 15% is not automatic.**

Tentative Schedule for the Course

As with any syllabus, this document reflects my best assessment of how the semester will go. We may need to make changes based on a variety of factors.

Date & Topic	Assignment Due Dates
September 1 – Introduction to the course	
September 13 – What is qualitative research?	
September 20 – Common qualitative research designs	<i>Researcher Identity Memo</i> Due September 22
September 27 – Study Design – choosing a sample	
October 4 – Expanding the research paradigm **Guest: Dr. Karenanna Creps	<i>Initial Description of Project Idea</i> Due October 6
October 11 – Collecting data: Interviews	
October 18 – Collecting data: Observations	
October 25: Fall Break – no class	
November 1 – Collecting data: Mining data	
November 8 – Data analysis 1	<i>Study Design and Exploratory Data Collection</i> Due November 3
November 15 – Data analysis 2	
November 22 – Validity, reliability, and ethics	
November 29 – Writing qualitative research	
December 6 – Project preparation	<i>Research Journal Snippet</i> Due December 8
December 17 (finals week) – Final presentations 12:45-2:45	<i>Final paper</i> Due December 15

Accommodations

Michigan State University is committed to providing equal opportunity for participation in all programs, services and activities. Requests for accommodations by persons with disabilities may be made by contacting the Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities at 517-884-RCPD or on the web at <http://rcpd.msu.edu>. Once your eligibility for an accommodation has been determined, you will be issued a verified individual services accommodation (VISA) form. Please present this form to me at the start of the term and/or two weeks prior to the accommodation date (test, project, etc.) Requests received after this date will be honored whenever possible.

Academic Honesty & Integrity:

I assume that all students are honest and that all course work and examinations represent the student's own work. Violations of the academic integrity policy such as cheating, plagiarism, selling course assignments or academic fraud are grounds for academic action and/or disciplinary sanction as described in the university's student conduct code. Students are strongly encouraged not to copy any text verbatim on class quizzes, reports, projects, or other class assignments without using appropriate quotations and source citations. Rather, work that is not yours needs to be properly cited, regardless of whether the source is a classmate, a website, or a published text.

Incidents of plagiarism are taken very seriously and will be pursued. For all incidents of plagiarism, the instructor is required to complete an Academic Dishonesty Report, which will be added to the student's record. For University regulations on academic dishonesty and plagiarism, refer to: <https://www.msu.edu/unit/ombud/academic-integrity/plagiarism-policy.html>.

Counseling Center:

Graduate school can be a challenging time. We may sometimes face situations and problems that we find difficult to deal with alone. I may be able to help. MSU also has an Office of Student Affairs and Services, with a Counseling Center, for which the phone number is (517) 355-8270 or you may email them at counseling@cc.msu.edu. The Center is located in Room 207 of the Student Services Building and their website is <http://www.counseling.msu.edu/>.

Student Feedback:

Michigan State University takes seriously the opinion of students in the evaluation of the effectiveness of instruction, and has implemented the SIRS (Student Instructional Rating System) process to gather student feedback. This course utilizes the "online SIRS" system. You will receive an email sometime during the last two weeks of class asking you to fill out the SIRS online form at your convenience. Please note that the final grade for this course will not be accessible on STUINFO during the week following the submission of grades for this course unless the SIRS online form has been filled out. You will have the option on the online SIRS form to decline to participate in the evaluation of this course – I hope, however, that you will be willing to give me your frank and constructive feedback so that I can instruct students even better in the future.

Michigan State University Teacher Education Department Core Principles Statement

We are scholars, researchers, and teacher educators committed to practices of equity and social justice in education. As an intellectual community, we aspire to prepare students who have the strong disciplinary content knowledge, the skills and the dispositions to be effective educators and agents of equity-oriented change.

Our work is guided by the following core principles:

- ***Humanizing Interactions, Practices & Scholarship***: We recognize the importance of attending to the humanizing aspects of our work and that building relationships of dignity and care is ethically necessary across our teaching, research and service.
- ***Linking Theory, Action & Practice***: We seek to challenge the status quo of educational scholarship by reflexively engaging practice and theory for the purpose of advancing a graduate and undergraduate teacher education that produces excellence among future teachers and teacher educators.
- ***Amplifying Voices***: We value multiple conceptual, theoretical, methodological and translational perspectives paying close attention to diverse and varied voices from communities that are often marginalized in education, including in our own work.
- ***Transforming Relationships***: We seek to create trust and reciprocity to both nurture and challenge relationships with communities, students and other partners for the purpose of elevating the profession of teaching.
- ***Participating in Public Discourse***: We proactively engage in public discourse with educational leaders, policy makers, and others concerned with education and teacher education.
- ***Engaging in Ongoing Critical Self-reflection***: We study, question, debate and revise these dynamic and robust areas of investigation in order to improve our practice.

Our stance is that these functions should not be seen as separate, but interdependent in the sense that strength in any one area depends upon strength in the others. We see the articulation of these principles as ongoing and continuously evolving.