

**Foundations of Qualitative Research
CSUS 831**

Spring 2021
Tuesday 3:00-5:50 p.m.
Thursday 12:40-2:30 p.m.

Instructor

Kimberly Chung
Department of Community Sustainability
317 Natural Resources Building

Phone: (517) 337-7541
Office hours: Monday 4:00-5:30/by appt
Email: kchung@msu.edu

I. Course description

This 5-credit course provides a hands-on introduction to the use of qualitative research methods. The course is organized around a class project that is designed to help us develop specific qualitative data collection and data analysis skills. Data collection methods include: informal and semi-structured interviewing, direct observation, and focus groups. We will also practice the management and analysis of these data with coding. Throughout the course, students will be asked to consider the advantages and disadvantages associated with each method and to consider alternate methods of data collection and analysis. The format is varied and will include lectures, discussion, group work, class presentations, and practical experience with the methods. ***The course requires significant time outside of class*** to collect and analyze data. There are no pre-requisites for this course, but previous research experience is helpful. Students who plan to use qualitative techniques in their thesis or dissertation tend to benefit the most.

This semester the course is listed as a hybrid course. However, it is expected that all instruction will be held online; if the university permits, we will hold scheduled class meetings in-person, on-campus in March and April. At this time it is not known if this will be possible, so we will have to remain flexible. The tentative dates in-class dates are indicated in the course schedule on the last page with **. Please mark these in your calendar.

The zoom link for our class is: <https://msu.zoom.us/j/95810425510> and the password is qual.

Course Aims

- To give students practical experience with a number of techniques that are used to collect and analyze qualitative data.
- To help students think analytically about a given research question and to design an appropriate qualitative strategy to answer that question.
- To encourage students to understand the vast heterogeneity in methodologies that employ qualitative research techniques and to think critically about how epistemological priors may affect the choice of methodology as well as study conclusions.
- To examine the nature of qualitative research and to reflect upon the standards of rigor placed upon it.
- To develop an appreciation for the relationship between the purpose of a research project, the theoretical framework underlying it, and the proposed research questions.
- To develop judgement and intuition about how to conduct a research study that is emergent in nature.

Course Objectives

At the end of the course, students should be able to:

- Demonstrate the ability to collect and analyze data using the methods presented in class.
- Design and conduct a small research project that uses qualitative methods to achieve a stated objective.
- Identify the strengths and weaknesses of each technique as well as the limitations of research findings.
- Write a concise research report that clearly presents the motivation, objectives, methods, results, limitations, and conclusions of a qualitative project.
- Appreciate the virtues and limitations of a qualitative approach to research and the role that it may play in addressing scholarly as well as practical questions.

II. Course Format

The course is structured as a seminar, with emphasis on discussion and active practice with various research techniques. Course materials are organized by weekly modules on D2L. Please take some time to visit the site and familiarize yourself with its organization. The best place to start is the Start Here Module, under Content.

Each class we will usually start with a discussion about a given research technique or research issue (hopefully keeping formal lectures to minimum). Students should do the assigned readings before class and be prepared to discuss the ideas, methods, and applications presented in these works. Following these discussions there will often be some type of in-class or 'laboratory' exercise, in which students practice a qualitative research technique and then discuss their experiences. Once our projects get underway, a significant amount of class time will be devoted to supporting students' work on their projects, with several dates in April identified as "workshop" days where students may get help they need on their project. Learning is collaborative and we will be discussing our project work throughout the class. As such, students tend to learn through other students' projects as well as their own.

Collegiality is important in this course. Each of us should feel free to raise questions, share research experiences during class, bring interesting articles or issues to class, or make suggestions about how we do things. The course is taught in an interdisciplinary fashion and it is expected that there will be diversity in disciplinary backgrounds and epistemological beliefs. As such, it is important that we cultivate a culture of open-mindedness in the class.

We will try to use as many online means as we can to create a community of practice within this class. They are not perfect, but they are a start. To this end I have created a class zoom lounge that students may use to meet before and after class; it is solely for students and I will not enter. If you'd like to hang out before or after class here is the link to our zoom lounge: <https://msu.zoom.us/j/95810425510>. Passcode: Lounge

Finally, midway through the course we will evaluate how it is going and try to make whatever changes we can to meet our course objectives and/or improve the experience. This is the first year that the course has been taught primarily online and it is expected that some adjustments will need to be made. You can help immensely by making constructive comments and identifying what is helpful and not helpful to you as a learner.

Required Readings

The course readings will be posted on-line by week on the class' D2L website under "Content." All required readings will be posted, but some students may want to purchase the textbooks from which many of the readings are derived. There are several readings from: Rubin H. and Rubin I. 2012. *Qualitative Interviewing. The Art of Hearing Data*, Third Edition. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. I have also recommended two additional books as general references for those who may do qualitative theses or dissertations. Each of these is very hands-on and practical:

Patton, Michael Quinn. 2015. *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Method, Fourth Edition*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Maxwell, Joseph. 2012. *Qualitative Research Design. An Interactive Approach, Third Edition*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

All of these texts are good reference books for those doing qualitative theses; take the opportunity to have a look at them and considering buying one or two if you will be doing qualitative research for your thesis or dissertation.

There will be a lot of materials distributed for the course. These materials are very useful for the final project. Some students have remarked that having physical copies of their assignments and readings helps because they can make notes on them and consult several documents at once. In the past some students have found it helpful to use a binder to organize their course handouts, completed assignments, notes, and comments from me about the term project. It might sound silly, but it really does help to track comments and progress on the project and the class in general. Some people are comfortable organizing and consulting documents completely digitally. It's a personal thing, works for some, does not work for others. Be open to making a physical system or to create your own system. Whatever works for you.

III. **Description of Assignments**

This course will require a significant amount of time out of class to collect and analyze data. One of the biggest challenges of using some qualitative techniques is the amount or time required to do a good job. It's important that you budget your time carefully and plan ahead for all the assignments, particularly the research exercises that are done for the final project.

3.1. Research Exercises (40%)

Students are required to turn in a series of written research exercises that have been conducted outside of class. The research exercises are based on the methods presented in class. They are:

1. Research design (5% of final grade)
2. Interview guide (5%)
3. Interview I (10%)
4. Interview II (10%)
5. Observation (10%)

Detailed guidelines for each exercise will be distributed in class and posted on D2L. Completed assignments should be type-written and address each point of the assignment. Your raw data (both real-time jottings and expanded field notes) should be included with the research exercise. Research exercises should be submitted on D2L before the beginning of class on the day they are due. Grades will be commensurate with your ability to meet the expectations of the assignment. Please note: clarity of expression, ability to follow directions, referencing style, and conciseness all count.

3.2. ***Final Research Project (35%)***

Students will carry out a research project using a combination of the methods presented in the course. By **Tuesday, January 26th**, students will have selected topics for their research projects. During the semester students will design five separate research exercises (see above), each which will address their research topic. Students will carry out the research exercises individually but will share their experiences and research exercise reports with colleagues in the class. In previous semesters one additional piece of qualitative research (e.g. a semi-structured interview, observation, focus group) was required for the final project. Students were expected to justify their choice of additional method. Because the time in class has been cut down this semester, we will only collect 3 pieces of data.

At the end of the semester each student will turn in a final report (35%). Expanded field notes and other illustrative materials (memos, displays, etc.) should be included as appendices to the report. Details on the format of the report will be handed out later in the semester.

The final research report will be due **Tuesday, April 27**. On **Friday, April 30**, the final reflection statements about the research process are due. Please note that it is very important to keep pace with the assignments in the class so that you will stay on track to finish the final project. The suggested timetable for the data collections is as follows, keep this as a useful reminder of your progress.

Suggested Data Collection Schedule for Final Project

Interview I	February 16 – February 24
Interview II	March 2– March 15
Observation	March 19 – March 30
Data Analysis and Report Writing	April 1 – April 27
Reflection	April 29 – April 30

3.3. Short Homework Exercises (10%)

Throughout the course students will be asked to complete short ‘homework assignments’ outside of class. These assignments will be turned before class on the due dates. The purpose of these assignments is to 1) provide material for in-class laboratory work/discussions; and/or 2) encourage progress on the data collection/analysis for the final research project.

These exercises will not be graded per se. Rather students will earn a point for turning in a *completed* assignment. It is expected that there will be roughly 10-12 homework assignments during the semester.

3.3. Class Participation (10%)

I believe that active participation in this class is necessary to absorb the principles and skills that are presented. Active learning is very much analogous to qualitative research. You have to ask questions, listen carefully to others, engage your brain in the process, digest the material that has been explicitly presented, and probe for tacit knowledge.

Expect to attend class prepared, participate in discussions, work earnestly on in-class laboratories, be open-minded and provide collegial support to fellow students. Do this and you will receive full credit in this area.

3.4. Final Reflection Statement (3%)

The purpose of this assignment is to allow you to step back and consider what you have learned in the course. We are often busy “doing” during the semester and it’s important to stop and reflect on what we have learned and where we want to go next with developing our own practice.

IV. Course Evaluation

With respect to grading, the percentages below reflect the relative weight of an assignment in determining your final grade.

ASSIGNMENT	WEIGHT
Research Exercises (5 total)	40%
Homework assignments/Progress Reports	12%
Research Project	35%
Class participation and collegial support of colleagues’ learning	10%
Final Reflection	3%

A Note on Grading. Throughout the course I will give you feedback on your work. As a word of warning, I leave a lot of space in the points spread so that I can give students an indication of how they need to progress and improve their practice; so the numeric marks can be low. Don't let this alarm you too much as the final grades are adjusted to take this into account. So, try not to convert numeric grades to a straight percentage and make an assumption about what that means. In addition, try not to get obsessive about every single point.

Final grades in the class are generally allotted as follows. Please note that 100% is taken to be the highest grade achieved in the class, so is generally lower than the total number of points.

88-100% total points	4.0
80-87.9%	3.5
71-79%	3.0
< 71%	2.5

To help those who are conscious of grades, I will also try to give students an indication of “where you stand in the class” from time to time. I try to focus on what we are learning rather than grades, but I am sympathetic to students’ desire to have feedback about how they are faring in the class. If you feel unsure about this, you should always feel free to come talk to me and ask me; it’s completely fair—so don’t be embarrassed if you are concerned. Additionally, with research exercises I allow students to resubmit any exercise one time if they wish to improve their grade, or to gain comments on an improved effort.

V. Course Policies

- 5.1. **MSU Community Compact.** We are holding classes during an unprecedented time in history. I need to remind everyone of the MSU Community compact, which explains our responsibilities for helping keep the MSU community safe and asks students to quarantine for ten days upon arrival back in the East Lansing area. Here’s the link to the CC: <https://msu.edu/together-we-will/msu-community-compact/>
- 5.2. **Class attendance.** Students are expected to attend class and to be on time. Absences will be noted. If you are sick, please stay home and get well. However, please notify the instructor beforehand for anticipated absences or as soon as possible for unexpected absences. If you miss class, it is your responsibility to obtain lecture notes from fellow

students and check D2L for upcoming assignments.

- 5.3. **Class conduct.** It's important that we are all "present" while we are in class. I therefore ask that we refrain from multi-tasking during class as that may take away from the work we are doing together. Please try to be present while we are working together. I will try to give breaks so that we do not get tired out, but please no texting, social media, or web surfing while we are together in class. I'd prefer that we all kept our video cameras on, but I understand if you need to turn it off.
- 5.4. **Readings.** Be ready to discuss them in depth in class. The readings are chosen carefully to give you background information about the different data collection and analysis techniques and are helpful resources when carrying out your own Research Exercises.
- 5.5. **Late assignments.** It is important to stay on top of the workload in this class. In order to help you stay on track, late assignments should be approved by me. This means contact me before the assignment is due, explain your circumstances, and state when you will turn in the assignment. I will respond and indicate an approval.
- 5.6. **Grading** – I allow students to resubmit any research exercise one time if they wish to improve their grade, or to obtain comments on an improved effort. The only rules are 1) you should turn in your new version with changes highlighted so it is easy for me to see them; 2) attach the "old" assignment; and 3) submit the "re-do" before the next research exercise is due. The latter helps to reinforce learning that will be applied to the next steps.
- 5.7. **Use of Desire to Learn (D2L)** – All readings and detailed guidelines for homework assignments will be posted on D2L. Additionally, completed assignments should be posted on D2L by the assigned date, with a printed copy to turn in during class. Posting your assignments online allows other colleagues in the class to view them and learn from each other's work.
- 5.8. **Accommodations** – If you need accommodations in this class related to a disability or religious holidays, please make an appointment with me to discuss as soon as possible.
- 5.9. **Academic Integrity** – [Article 2.III.B.2](#) of the SRR states: "The student shares with the faculty the responsibility for maintaining the integrity of scholarship, grades, and professional standards." In addition, (insert name of unit offering course) adheres to the policies on academic honesty specified in General Student Regulation 1.0, [Protection of](#)

[Scholarship and Grades](#); the all-University Policy on [Integrity of Scholarship and Grades](#); and [Ordinance 17.00](#), Examinations.

Therefore, unless authorized by your instructor, you are expected to complete all course assignments, including homework, lab work, quizzes, tests, and exams, without assistance from any source. You are expected to develop original work for this course; therefore, you may not submit course work you completed for another course to satisfy the requirements for this course. Also, you are not authorized to use the www.allmsu.com Web site to complete any course work in this course. Students who violate MSU regulations on Protection of Scholarship and Grades will receive a failing grade in the course or on the assignment.

Faculty are required to report all instances in which a penalty grade is given for academic dishonesty. Students reported for academic dishonesty are required to take an online course about the integrity of scholarship and grades. A hold will be placed on the student's account until such time as the student completes the course.

VI. Course Schedule

Week #	Date	Topic	Assignments Due
1	January 12	Syllabus and D2L site are up	Optional assignments
		What is a qualitative approach?	
2	January 19	Overview of qualitative; Epistemology, theoretical perspectives, methodology & method	
	January 21	Developing Study Questions	HW 1: entry statement (post Jan 20 6pm so people can review pre-class)
3	January 26	Qualitative Research Design: Study Purpose	HW 2: draft study topic
	January 28	Qualitative Research Design: Conceptual Framework and RQs	
4	February 2	Qualitative Research Design Wrap Interviewing overview	
	February 4	Interviews	RE 1 –study plans: or Feb 2 for early feedback
5	February 9	Interview Exercise	
	February 11	Interview Tips	RE 2 –interview guide
6	February 16	Direct Observation	
	February 18	Direct Observation	HW 3: 2 paragraphs
7	February 23	Observation Techniques & Field notes	HW X: Observation
	February 25	Coding	RE 3: Interview I Report
8	March 2	[MSU Health Day]	
**	March 4	Coding Exercise	HW 4a: Read coding data

9 **	March 9	Coding Exercise	HW 4b: Develop codes
**	March 11	Coding Exercise	HW 5: Coding exercise
10	March 16	What makes a good code?	HW 6: Observation plan
	March 18	Focus Groups I	RE 4: Interview II Report
11 **	March 23	FG and Displays I	HW 7: Raw notes 3 rd data collection Due Weds March 24
	March 25	Displays II	HW 8: Sat March 27
12	March 30	Displays III	
	April 1	Tying the analysis process together; Class examples	RE 5: Observation Report
13	April 6	Project Coding Workshop/Examples	HW 9: Repackaging/Reducing your Data Mon April 5
	April 8	Project Coding Workshop/Examples	HW 10: Creating Displays
14	April 13	Making our way to Effective Displays	
	April 15	Project Display Workshop/Examples	HW 11: Progress Report
15	April 20	Project Display Workshop/Examples	
	April 22	MSU Study Day: Optional Workshop	Final Paper Due Tues, April 27
Finals Week	April 26-30	Reflection	Reflection Statement Due Friday, April 30