Boise State University
Organizational Performance & Workplace Learning (OPWL) Department
OPWL532 – Ethnographic Research in Organizations (3 credits)

This is a synopsis of the course syllabus intended to provide an overview of the course. Please note that details of the course may change from semester to semester.

General Course Description

Ethnographic research is an approach to learning about social and cultural life of communities, organizations, institutions, and other settings through which we discover how knowledge, values, beliefs, activities, etc. of people in those settings contribute to the reproduction, ongoing creation or change of organizations, society and culture.

Students receive a foundation in philosophical perspectives and methods supporting ethnographic research, learn when and for what sort of questions ethnography is appropriate, apply research design, ethnographic data collection and analysis techniques and explore strategies for presenting and critiquing ethnographic research. PREREQ: OPWL532 or Permission of Instructor.

Course Goals

At the end of this course, you should be able to do the following (evaluation method for each is listed in parentheses):

1. **State** differences between ethnographic and experimental or quasi-experimental research (discussion).
2. **Describe** the relationship between ethnographic and experimental research methods (discussion).
3. **List** and **Describe** five standard qualitative research designs used in the social sciences (discussion).
4. **List** and **Describe** characteristics of ethnography as they relate to your hypothetical research (discussion).
5. **Describe** conditions that justify use of ethnographic research methods (discussion, journal, research design, final project).
6. **List** and **Describe** six different paradigms that can be used to frame an ethnographic research project (discussion).
7. **List** and **Describe** types of data used in ethnographic research (discussion, journal, research design, final project).
8. **List** and **Describe** three ‘frames’ that can be used to guide ethnographic observations (discussion, journal, research design, final project).
9. **Describe** the use of mapping and other elicitation techniques in ethnographic data collection (discussion, journal, research design, final project).
10. **Describe** triangulation of data in ethnographic research (discussion, journal, research design, final project).
11. **Create** a design/plan for ethnographic research (discussion, journal, research design).
12. **Write** an ethnographic research question (discussion, journal, research design, final project).
13. **Create** a formative research model (journal, research design, final project).
14. **Demonstrate** methods for selecting samples of a population to include in an ethnographic research (discussion, journal, research design).
15. **Generate** fieldnotes in the course of observation in an organizational setting (journal, final project).
16. **Generate** open-ended and semi-structured interview questions (journal, final project).
17. **Perform** interviews in an organizational setting (journal, final project).
18. **Collect** official documents from a workplace (journal, final project).
19. Perform data analysis on ethnographic data (journal, research design, final project).
20. Generate a draft report of ethnographic research (journal, final project).
21. List and Describe principles to ensure that ethnographic research is conducted ethically (discussion).
22. Tolerate the instructor’s stories of fieldwork.

Course Assignments

Reflective Journal

Throughout the semester you will be journaling your evolving ideas about (a) ethnographic research and how you see it fitting into your work or future research, (b) the assigned readings and (c) your experiences in designing, doing fieldwork, analyzing your data and (d) ‘working up’ ways to communicate what you’re discovering and creating through the research process. In terms of Bloom’s taxonomy of cognitive skills, the journal addresses processes of analysis and synthesis and everything below it on the taxonomy.

Weekly Discussions / Peer Debriefings

After about week 3, each class period will include both whole class discussions and a ‘peer debriefing’ session in which you share the contents of your journal with several others in a small group setting. Each of these peer debriefing sessions will focus on a different topic related to the readings and research methods included for that week.

Research Design Planning Document

Following examples and guidance provided in readings and class discussions, prepare a project proposal and data gathering & analysis plan. This submission should be no longer than about 4000 words and should include the following.

1. Situation
   Describe the situation in which you’ll be conducting the research. This can be anything from a paragraph to a page in length

2. Data Sources
   Describe and Justify
   1. Types of data you think are required to answer your initial research questions.
   2. Who or what are the data sources and how you will identify/sample them.
   3. Why choose these sources and speculate how they will contribute to answering the research question(s)?

3. Data Gathering
   Describe and Justify
   1. Methods you plan to use to gather data (for example, observation, focus groups, documents, etc.)
   2. Why those methods and how they will contribute to answering the research question(s)?
Final Course Project

The final course project is an opportunity for you to demonstrate the performance of your research design and synthesis of course content and feedback in your journal and weekly discussion areas, including examples of data collection, analysis and a draft reporting of the research.

Your final course project should include the following items. Model these after one or more of the actual research reports assigned in class or collected through your independent literature review of qualitative or ethnographic research. Your grade on the final project will be based on the extent to which your report reflects consistent use of theory and/or paradigms, empirical data and descriptions that weave the whole together into a unit that approaches an answer to the research question(s).

It is acceptable that the final project deviate from the research planning documents depending on conditions experienced and adjusted-to during the project. The final project should be no longer than about 9000 words (not including appendices) and should include:

1. Description of the setting and research questions (elaborated and refined from the planning document)
2. Advanced draft of a partial report that synthesizes the chosen paradigm, supporting literature or experience that provides a framework, empirical data, and which altogether approaches an answer to the research question(s). Pattern this after one or more of the actual research reports assigned in class or collected through your independent literature review.
3. Reflective analysis of how (or if) you and your perspectives on organizations and organizational activities have changed through the course of activities this semester.
4. Appendices that include (a) empirical data (samples of actual fieldwork notes, interview questions and transcripts, documents collected), and (b) data analysis (samples of coding, category/pattern building, structure building). The samples chosen for inclusion should provide support for the analytic reporting provided in item 2 in the final project requirements, above.

Case Study / `Tales from the Field' report

Case studies should be about 2500 words in length and include at least one graphic (perhaps more, as you see fit) to help communicate the relationships that make your research project (and any possible interventions you may choose to add) clear to the reader. See the schedule below for a deadline for submitting your case study/tales from the field.

IRB Web Based Training

The Institutional Research Board (IRB) at Boise State University has specified that all researchers proposing to involve human participants in research conducted through BSU shall complete a set of web-based training modules on the philosophy, rationale and rules governing ethics of research with human subjects. Completion of these modules is also offered as a point-getting activity for students enrolled in OPWL532.

Prerequisites

OPWL 536