

*Information Systems Department
University of Maryland Baltimore County
Baltimore Maryland 21250
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IS 805-01

Advanced Field Research Methods

Fall 2017

BASICS

Meets: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 8:30-9:45am, in ITE 406
Professor: Dr. Carolyn Seaman
Office: ITE 404B
E-mail: cseaman@umbc.edu
Phone: (410) 455-3937
Office Hours: Wednesdays 10-11:30, Fridays 12-3, and by appointment.
Readings: Merriam, Sharan B.; Tisdell, E. J. (2016) *Qualitative Research*, 4th ed. Jossey-Bass.
Also downloadable PDF articles provided by the instructor

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course trains the advanced student of information systems in the research methodologies required to undertake original field research and to evaluate the growing scientific literature based on this approach. The course will engage the interpretivist paradigm and the qualitative research traditions within IS. Specifically, it will address the research design theory (e.g. Grounded Theory), data collection techniques (e.g. observation, interviewing, focus groups, surveys), analysis methods (e.g. coding for content and protocol) and reporting frameworks (e.g. case study, ethnography). This material is concertized via student-designed research projects. Additionally, contemporary IS field research will be critiqued, training students to publish their own field research in this discipline.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- Appreciate the fundamental philosophical stances in IS research.
- Be able to critically evaluate qualitative research.
- Effectively combine research techniques into a coherent research design that addresses specific research questions.
- Gain mastery of core field-based data collection and analysis techniques.

OFFICE HOURS

Students are encouraged to take advantage of office hours. I am available many times of the week besides those posted. Feel free to request an appointment via e-mail at any time to ensure that I will be available. Students are welcome to raise any issues dealing with the course or their studies, however, as a policy I do not reiterate material from classes that you have missed. It is best to download any lecture slides and check with your fellow classmates to cover absences.

CLASSROOM CONDUCT

Regular attendance is expected, but not required. Do note, however, that active participation in class exercises and discussions is a sizeable portion of your 805 experience and final course grade. Please let me know, if possible, if you are going to miss class. If arriving late to class, please be courteous to your fellow students and instructor. Disruptive behavior cannot be tolerated. This also includes cell phones and pagers, which must be silenced for the duration of the class.

ACADEMIC CONDUCT

By enrolling in this course, each student assumes the responsibilities of an active participant in UMBC's scholarly community in which everyone's academic work and behavior are held to the highest standards of honesty and integrity. Acts of academic misconduct, as defined below, will result in disciplinary action that may include failure of the course, suspension, or dismissal. (Please consult the UMBC Student Handbook for the full policy.)

Cheating: Knowingly using or attempting to use unauthorized material or study aids, or employing the help of anyone outside the class, in any academic exercise. This applies in particular to the take-home exam and the exercise homework.

Fabrication: Intentional and unauthorized falsification or invention of any information, data, or citation in an academic exercise. This applies in particular to the exercises.

Facilitation: Knowingly helping or attempting to help another commit an act of academic dishonesty. This applies to all aspects of this course.

Plagiarism: Knowingly representing the words or ideas of another as one's own in any academic exercise. This applies in particular to all written work in the course.

COURSE GRADING

The final grade for the course is calculated from grades on five different course components: class exercises (40%), an exam (15%), a topic paper (15%), class participation (15%), and participation in article reviews (15%).

The University's Graduate Catalog states that grades of "A", "B", and "C" are passing and grades of "D" and "F" indicate failure. In addition, I am taking advantage this semester of the University's policy allowing "+" and "-" grades. In both cases, there is specifically no mention of any numerical scores associated with these letter grades. Consequently, there are no pre-defined numerical boundaries that determine final letter grades. These boundaries can only be defined at the end of the semester after all scores have been earned. At that point, boundaries for final letter grades can be defined such that they conform to a reasonable distribution of grades. This means that it is not appropriate to assume that a given numerical score corresponds to a particular letter grade. It is also important to understand that final letter grades reflect academic achievement and not effort.

LATE WORK

Assignments are due at the beginning of class or as indicated. Late assignments will not be accepted, except under extreme circumstances, in which case an extension must be negotiated with the instructor on a case by case basis, at least 24 hours before the assignment is due.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

CLASS EXERCISES

There are five major class exercises during the course of the semester: research design, interviewing, observation, survey critique and coding. Some exercises involve both in-class work and homework (both parts are graded), while others are entirely in-class. In all cases, the grading is heavily based on level of participation (in other words, it matters more to me that you fully participated than that you were really good at the skill we were practicing). Details on the exercises will be given later in the semester, but altogether the exercises constitute **40%** of the final grade.

TAKE-HOME EXAM

There will be a week-long, take-home essay exam due 11/14. This exam will integrate content covered to date and will evaluate your critical reasoning with regard to field-based IS research. The exam counts for **15%** of the final grade.

TOPIC PAPER

The topic paper is expected to be approximately 15 pages double-spaced. It allows the student an opportunity to be a bit more introspective about their 805 experience, how it fits with their own personal research beliefs and style, and how it might impact their future research choices. Each student will be expected to pick one topic that has been discussed in class (i.e. interviewing, coding, etc). The student will then need to find two other readings related to that topic (that were not used as reading in class). One reading must be a methodology article (i.e. describing a particular technique or approach to the chosen topic) and the other must be a description of a study involving the topic. These readings should be scholarly conference papers, journal articles, or book chapters. They do not have to be limited to the IS and IT literature, but can come from other disciplines, although it is encouraged to try the technology literature first. The paper, then, should discuss the topic chosen and integrate both the additional readings and the class discussions/lectures/readings. The paper must also include a reflection section that discusses what the student has learned in IS 805, an assessment of the student's level of skill and comfort with qualitative research methods, and how qualitative methods might or might not play a role in their dissertation research.

Each student must email Dr. Seaman with their chosen topic for the paper, along with the two papers they want to base the paper on, by **October 19**. The first draft of the paper is due **November 16** and the final paper is due **December 12**. Dr. Seaman will provide feedback on the drafts by **November 30**. The topic paper constitutes **15%** of the final grade for the course.

CLASS PARTICIPATION

Every student is expected to have completed all assigned readings prior to class. This will be evaluated through a Readiness Assessment Process, described below, during all class sessions for which there was assigned reading. All students are also expected to actively participate in all classroom activities. Contributions will be noted and mid-semester feedback will be provided. Participation in article reviews is graded separately and is not part of this assignment. This constitutes **15%** of the final grade for the course, where 5% comes from participation in classroom activities, and 10% comes from the Readiness Assessment Process (5% from the iRAT and 5% from the tRAT).

Readiness Assessment Process: Just before and at the beginning of each class for which there is an assigned reading, the class will complete a RAP. The RAP has four parts:

- Individual Readiness Assessment Test (iRAT): The process begins with a short test that is taken individually before you come to class. This test is used to assess your individual comprehension of the assigned readings. **You can use your books and other readings** for this and the test is not timed.
- Team Readiness Assessment Test (tRAT): Following the iRAT, you will re-take the same 5- to 10-minute test as a team. Although **tRATs are closed-book**, team members are encouraged to bring their notes and/or iRATs to class to foster team discussion on the tRATs.
- tRAT Review: Following each tRAT, we will discuss the answers to each question. Each team will provide their answer and we will be calling on students randomly to explain the answer. This means that everybody on your team must be prepared to answer each question that you're working on.
- Muddiest Points: At the end of every tRAT, your team will have the opportunity to share the "muddiest points" of the assigned readings, i.e. the concepts and ideas that need more clarification. I will do my best to focus on those points in the lecture for that day.

ARTICLE REVIEWS

On the class schedule, there are four class periods reserved for "article reviews". The first one will be conducted by Dr. Seaman, as an example. The other three article reviews will each be led by a team of 3 different students. Please email Dr. Seaman with your preferences for which date you would like to help lead an article review, and for which role (described below – Student 1, Student 2, or Student 3) you would like to fill, by **September 21**. The three roles and their responsibilities for each article review are outlined below:

Student 1: Chooses one of the papers to be discussed and summarizes both papers.

Student 2: Critiques both papers to be discussed.

Student 3: Proposed discussion questions and leads the discussion in class.

All students: Participate in the discussion, both on the Blackboard discussion board and in class, by providing new discussion questions and/or responding to other discussion questions.

Procedure: For each article review class, the following tasks must be carried out to prepare for and conduct the review:

1. Three weeks before the date of the article review (or earlier), **Student 1** proposes one or more papers to Dr. Seaman.

NOTE: Papers must be from a scholarly conference or journal and describe a study that used qualitative methods in addressing a research question or problem from any area of IT or IS.

2. Two weeks before the date of the article review (or earlier), Dr. Seaman and **Student 1** come to an agreement on the paper to be used. Dr. Seaman chooses a second paper to be included in the article review. Dr. Seaman posts both papers on the Blackboard site. **Everyone** starts reading them.
3. At least one week before the date of the article review:
 - a. **Student 1** prepares, and posts on Blackboard, a summary of each paper (max. 3 paragraphs per paper).
 - b. **Student 2** prepares, and posts on Blackboard, a critique of each paper (max. 3 paragraphs per paper).
 - c. **Student 3** prepares, and posts on Blackboard, three discussion questions related to the two papers.
 - d. All three of these posts should include the date of the article review, and the date and time that online discussion closes (see below). All postings need to go in the appropriate folder on the discussion board.
4. Up until 48 hours before the date/time of the article review in class, **each student in the class (other than Student 1, Student 2, and Student 3)** must post at least once, either proposing a new discussion question or responding to someone else's discussion question.

NOTE: The idea here is to get the discussion going before class starts, so please feel free to respond to each other, back and forth, to get some thoughts going on the discussion board.

5. During the article review in class, the following things happen, all coordinated by **Student 3**:
 - a. **Student 1** presents a summary of the two papers. This should include not only the summary originally posted on Blackboard, but also incorporate any relevant comments from other students that were posted on the discussion board. It should be a straightforward summary, not a critique or a discussion of pros and cons. It should be no more than 5 minutes long. No slides or projector should be used.
 - b. **Student 2** presents a critique of the two papers. This should include not only the critique originally posted on Blackboard, but also incorporate (although not reiterate at length) any relevant comments from other students that were posted on the discussion board. It should not include a summary, as that will already be summarized by Student 1. It should be no more than 10 minutes long. No slides or projector should be used.

NOTE: Student 1 and Student 2 should coordinate so that their presentations are not redundant and cover different points.
 - c. **Student 3** leads an open discussion of the two papers. Some hints for **Student 3** to keep in mind to make sure the discussion is substantive:
 - Incorporate, but do not repeat in any detailed points made on the discussion board. The idea is to pick up the discussion where it left off online, not reiterate the discussion that already happened there. Ask people to expand on what they wrote online.
 - Do not talk too much – this is the biggest mistake discussion leaders make. Your job is to get other people talking, not so much to share your own views.
 - Feel free to directly ask people to contribute if they are being too quiet. Everyone gets graded on their level of participation, so you're doing them a favor by getting them to speak up.
 - Feel free to steer the conversation away from someone who is doing too much of the talking. A student's grade for participation suffers if they dominate the discussion, so again you're doing them a favor by getting them to say less.

- Have a small set of 3-5 additional questions or comments, or follow-ups to things on the discussion board, in reserve in case the discussion fizzles before the end of class.

The article reviews, overall, count for **15%** of the final grade. Each student receives 60% of their article review grade based on how well they fill the role of Student 1, Student 2, or Student 3 in one article review, and the other 40% based on how well they participate in the other 3 article reviews.

SCHEDULE

A full schedule of class lectures, activities, and due dates is posted on the Blackboard site and will be kept up-to-date there. I will try to keep modifications to the schedule to a minimum, and I will advise students of all changes as far in advance as possible.