

RHE 309K: Rhetoric and Research, Fall 2009

Class Website: <http://instructors.cwrl.utexas.edu/little/>

Instructor: Megan Little

Office: FAC 16

Office Hours: M 10-11:30; W 11-12:30

## Course Overview

What do you think of when you hear the word “research”? Stacks of books in libraries? Clinical settings and labs? In this class, we’ll learn more about another important kind of academic research: learning from the living.

By “learning from the living,” I don’t mean taking your mom’s advice or seeking out good mentors (although, these can be sound practices). I mean interviewing, observing, and interacting with human subjects to create new knowledge about human behavior and culture—perhaps the most complex of all topics.

This is precisely what people do in an array of academic disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology, education, psychology, medicine, linguistics, and well, rhetoric. And (not surprisingly) there are vastly different ways to do this kind of research. One is to design experiments that control certain variables so a researcher can establish predictable, reproduce-able causal arguments. Another is to interview subjects about their recollections and feelings about an event or experience, sometimes to identify areas to research more closely (as in grounded theory), sometimes to provide important subjective perspectives on events, phenomena, and personal experiences (creating what oral historian Allesandro Portelli calls a “cross section of subjectivity”—what does that mean?). Another is to designate a person, place, or phenomenon as a “case study,” which means using a single instance to start interrogating the traits of a broader group. And, yet another approach is to immerse oneself in an aspect of a culture as much as you possibly can, gathering multiple kinds of evidence around the same phenomenon, ritual, or behavior, and then interpret it using a particular lens, as in ethnography. Interestingly, people often mix and match these methods, so you can have an oral history that has components of statistical analysis, or (quite commonly) you can have a comprehensive ethnography that also includes a particular case study of an individual. In this class, we will read different kinds of human subjects research and, in the process, learn several important skills.

We’ll start with the theoretical and conceptual by looking at and analyzing example studies. We’ll end with the practical and ethical, as you each embark on your own endeavor to “learn from the living.”

## Class goals

**Reading rhetorically:** One skill you will learn in this class is to analyze and interpret texts rhetorically. For example, we’ll ask questions like: what is the main claim of a given ethnography? What evidence does the researcher use to support this claim? How does a researcher move from the particular observation

to the general postulation about a culture, and is the move valid?

**Academic writing:** Another important skill we'll explore is: what makes for good academic writing? This class is essentially a writing class, so you will write a lot, including both formal and informal papers. You will produce three different kinds of formal papers: First, rhetorical analysis and close-reading of ethnography, next, a proposal for your own human subjects research project (either case study or oral history), and finally, a brief write-up of a pilot run (two interviews, or one interview and one set of observational notes) for your proposed research project.

**Human subjects research:** Your final project in this class will enable you to do original human subjects research on language use in a case study you identify. You'll be asked to show us excerpts from the data you collect and present some tentative ideas and findings. Before you start your research, you'll also learn about the ethics of human subject research and why institutional review boards (IRBs) exist.

### **Assignment descriptions and breakdowns**

Again, this is at its heart a writing class. That means we will write a lot. Almost everyday. Literally every week. And I will read almost everything you write, as will other students in this class. We will spend time reading and responding to each other's writing, both as a class and individually. Listed below are the different kinds of assignments (both writing and otherwise) that will form the bulk of your class grade.

#### **Forum postings (20 points)**

You will complete 10 forum postings (FPs) on the class website, each with a minimum 300 words and each worth 2 points of your final grade. While this is a lot of writing, my students in the past tended to find these useful. They are graded complete/not complete based on whether you answer the specific question or perform the specific task and have fulfilled the length requirement, so they are a great place for you to try out ideas and play with different writing styles. The only way your postings can be graded down is if they consistently show a blatant lack of effort, do not perform the assignment, or consistently fall below the required word count. If this occurs, I will talk with you privately.

Forums are a place for you to post questions about our readings. A perfectly valid posting, for example, might simply point out the confusing parts of a passage and try like heck to make sense of it. In other words, forums need not present a "flawless" and complete interpretation. Try something, be creative, take a risk, throw some thinking our way. I will also encourage you to use forum postings to jump-start your ideas for formal paper assignments. Several students in the past have been able to copy and paste from their forum postings into their formal papers, or at least, build upon the kernel of an idea they started on the forum. The last forum posting of each unit can also be a working draft of your formal paper (discussed below).

One last thing about forums: they're public. Your classmates can (and will) read

your postings, and I will respond to each and every forum posting with my own feedback on your thinking and writing. This initially intimidates some students, but I've received almost unanimous feedback that students feel they benefit from reading each other's postings with interest. Some even read my feedback on others' postings. It lets you see what kind of writing and interpretation I find convincing, and also what kinds of statements I am prone to resist. This is important, as my responses are meant to model how members of the academic community would respond to you. In other words, my job is to help you enter an academic conversation, so I personify how members of a humanities- or social science-based discipline, such as rhetoric, would likely respond to your thinking.

#### **Forum activities (part of class participation grade)**

You will read and respond to each other's postings and we'll have several in-class activities and discussions inspired by your postings and responses. For example, perhaps several students are interested in the same passage. We'll look at it together in class. Perhaps a student raises an important question, or there are two very different interpretations of the same piece of text. This would be something I'd ask students to talk about in class. I will keep track of your participation in forum activities, so missing a lot of class and missing these activities can negatively impact your grade.

#### **Presentation (10 points)**

You will also be expected to present some tentative findings from your human subjects research study near the end of the semester. I will hand out a sign-up schedule and instructions for this presentation at the beginning of unit 3.

#### **Instructor-led paper workshops (part of class participation grade)**

We will also engage in instructor-led workshops, meaning I will select sample papers and talk about them in class. Some students are reluctant at first about having their writing talked about. Since I use papers as examples of good writing and analysis, and don't name names, most students aren't worried about it. But if you are very uncomfortable with this prospect, feel free to come talk to me privately.

#### **Peer review (part of formal paper grade)**

We will also do in-class peer reviews, where you talk with a partner or partners about your papers. These are mandatory and a part of your formal paper grade. These cannot be made up outside of class. Please don't miss them!

#### **Formal papers (20, 20, 20 points, total of 60 points)**

You will turn in three formal papers. These must be double-spaced, typed, 11-12 point font, 1-inch margins. Paper prompts will be discussed in class one week before the peer review session. Usually, you have the option of posting a working draft as one of your forum postings (on the class schedule, this means forum postings 3, 6, and 9 can be formal paper drafts). This way, you get my feedback on your paper before turning it in for a grade.

#### **Reading**

Expect a minimum of 2 hours of reading in preparation for each class. If it

becomes apparent that students are not performing the required reading, I will have pop-quizzes that are part of your participation grade. A good way to avoid the pop-quiz scenario is to talk in class!

### **Participation (10 points)**

Participating in this class is very important. This means reading the assignments, participating in forum inspired activities, writing thoughtful comments for your classmates on their forum postings, and talking in class. If you're looking for an easy way to up your grade, it's simple. Participate! I will also base your participation grade on other informal activities, such as class pop-quizzes and free writing and brainstorming exercises.

### **Grades**

Based on the assignments listed above, the grading breakdown is:

Forum postings 20%

Participation = 10%

Presentation = 10%

Formal paper 1 = 20%

Formal paper 2 = 20%

Formal paper 3 = 20%

### **Required Class Materials**

Each student must purchase the course materials at JENN's copy center (find more information, including directions, on the class website). These course packets are generally under \$20.00.

### **Late Work**

Papers and other out-of-class assignments must be turned in at the time they are due. Because we have a tightly timed schedule, getting even a little behind can hurt you severely, and if a class day is planned around your writing, late work will hurt your classmates also. All late work will lose one full letter grade for every day (not class day) past the due date (for example, an A- paper due on Tuesday and turned in on Thursday is two days late—Wednesday, Thursday—so it falls to a C-).

If you cannot attend class on the date an assignment is due, turn it in early, arrange something with me in advance (such as an electronic submission), or ask a classmate or friend to drop it off during scheduled class time. There is no makeup of in-class work.

### **Attendance**

You are expected to attend class daily, to arrive on time, to have prepared any assigned reading and writing, and to participate in all in-class activities. After three absences, your grade may begin to drop, and after six, you are at risk of failing the class. (The only excused absences are those taken for religious holidays and for official university business, and you are responsible for all work missed while you were absent.) If you find that an unavoidable problem prevents you from attending class, please discuss the problem with me in advance. I will take roll at each meeting.

The Department of Rhetoric and Writing's official policy on absences holds that students automatically fail upon a fifth absence. I will enforce this policy in class.

### **Computer Use and Availability**

Computers are available to you in the Student Microcomputer Facility (SMF) on the second floor of the Flawn Academic Center (FAC). In addition, one benefit of being in a computer-assisted classroom is that you have access to the Computer Writing and Research Lab (CWRL) student laboratory, Parlin 102. This means you can use the computers (for CWRL class work) during the lab's hours of operation, and you can print (course work for this class) for no charge.

### **Scholastic Responsibility**

Turning in work that is not your own, or any other form of scholastic dishonesty, will result in a major course penalty, possibly failure of the course. At the very least, you will almost certainly receive a zero on the assignment. A report of the incident will also be made to the Office of the Dean of Students.

Note: Ignorance about what constitutes plagiarism will not excuse a student or serve as a mitigating factor in adjudicating any instance of plagiarism. One thing you should learn in this class is how—and why—to properly cite and attribute sources, so if you do not know, you must make sure to ask.

You should read and understand the Statement on Scholastic Responsibility in The Student Guide to First-Year Writing. I strongly encourage you to use services offered by the Undergraduate Writing Center (FAC 211, 471-6222). The consultants at the UWC are trained to help you resolve your own problems so that all your writing reflects what you have learned.

If you have any questions about the use you are making of sources for your assignments, see me before you turn in the project.

### **Students With Disabilities**

The University of Texas at Austin provides upon request appropriate academic adjustments for qualified students with disabilities. For more information, contact the Office of the Dean of Students at 471-6259, 471-4641 TDD.

### **Assignment and class discussion schedule**

W Aug 26: Welcome and introductions, content-based and skills-based goals of this class, overview of the class website, sample data interpretation exercise. Assignment: peruse the class website and buy the course reader.

<h2>Unit 1: Ethnographic environments</h2>

M Aug 31: Discussion of class policies, requirements, and grading. Official UT email check. Create class website user IDs and passwords. Introduction to unit 1: ethnographic environments. Assignment: Forum Posting (FP) 0, reading:

Foley, "Introduction"

W Sept 2: In-class FP 0 response. Class discussion of "Introduction." What is ethnography? Assignment: FP 1, read Foley, "The Great American Football Ritual."

M Sept 7: **FP 1 due** and in-class response. Class discussion of Foley: What can be an ethnographic environment? Read Foley, "Working and Playing Around in the Classroom" and Graff, "The Art of Summarizing"

W Sept 9: Class discussion of Foley, the classroom as ethnographic environment. Assignment: read assigned portions of Mead, from *Coming of Age in Somoa*; write FP 2.

M Sep 14: **FP 2 due** and in-class response. Class discussion of Mead. Paper prompt discussed. Assignment: Read assigned portion of Boellstorff, from *Coming of Age in Second Life*, Graff, "The Art of Quoting"

W Sep 16: Class discussion of Boellstorff, ethnography of "real" versus "virtual" environments; Assignment: FP 3, draft of paper, read Elbow, "Free Writing Exercises"

M Sep 21: **FP 3 due**. In-class workshop of close-reading and quotation analysis; informal question/answer/brainstorming for the formal paper.

W Sep 23 **Peer review session** for formal paper 1 (required); read Elbow, "The Process of Writing--Growing"

M Sep 28 **Formal Paper 1 due**, anonymous evaluation of unit 1. Assignment: read Glesne, "A Bit of Historical Context" from *Becoming Qualitative Researchers*

## Unit 2: Oral history and case study

Sep 30 W: Introduction to unit 2: arguments about the general and the particular, the difference between oral history, case study, ethnography. Assignment: read Zora Neale Hurston, from *Mules and Men*, "Introduction" and "Four."

Oct 5 M: Discussion of Hurston: how did she do it? Assignment: read Haley, "Black History, Oral History, and Genealogy," assigned oral history from online archive

Oct 7 W: Discussion of Haley. In-class discussion of and listening to samples from oral history archive. Assignment: Read Shostak, "Introduction" and assigned portions from *Nisa*, FP 4.

Oct 12 M: **FP 4 due** and in-class response. Discussion of Shostak. Read Elbow, "The Process of Writing--Cooking" and Behar, "My Best Friend Marta"

Who Lives Across the Border from me in Detroit"

Oct 14 W: Discussion of Behar, Read: introduction to Case study, Clark, "On Blocking and Unblocking Sonya," FP 5 assigned.

Oct 19 M: **FP 5 due** and in-class response. Discussion of Clark. Reading: more case study examples (handout) and IRB reading (handout). Paper prompt handed out and discussed.

Oct 21 W: Discussion of IRB forms. Assignment: Reading, Graff, "So What, Who Cares?; Saying Why it Matters"; take human subjects training online. FP 6 assigned (draft of formal paper).

Oct 26 M: **FP 6 due** and instructor-led writing workshop. Discussion of IRB component of formal paper 2.

Oct 28 W: **Peer review session** for formal paper 2.

Nov 2 M: **Formal Paper 2 Due**, anonymous evaluation of unit 2. Assignment: read Terkel, Parker, "Interviewing the Interviewer" from *The Oral History Reader*

**Unit 3: Individual projects, practical guidance**

Nov 4 W: Introduction to unit 3, practical guidance for collecting and analyzing data for your individual human subjects research projects. Discussion of Terkel/Parker. Assignment: Read Glesne, "Making Words Fly: Developing Understanding through Interviewing" from *Becoming Qualitative Researchers* and Weiss, "Interviewing" from *Learning from Strangers*

Nov 9 M: Discussion of Glesne and Weiss. Consideration of sample data interview data in class. Assignment: read Bishop, "Being There in Person: Looking, Taking and Collecting," and approaches to writing field notes (handout)

Nov 11 W: Discussion of Bishop. Consideration of sample field notes in class. Assignment: FP 7: Interview or observation 1 (if interview, transcribe relevant portion for posting).

Nov 16 M **FP 7 Due** Sharing stories from the field, consideration of student data. Assignment: FP8: Interview or observation field notes 2 (if interview, transcribe relevant portion for posting). read Glesne, "Finding Your Story: Data Analysis."

Nov 18 W **FP 8 Due** Discussion of Glesne, sharing stories from the field, consideration of student data. Assignment: FP 9, informal writing about your "story" and your approach to "writing up" your data; read Weiss, "Writing the Report"

Nov 23 M **FP 9 Due** Discussion of Weiss, sharing stories and data

continued. Assignment: FP 10, draft of formal paper write-up

Nov 25 W: Class discussion, brainstorming of paper topics

Nov 30 M **FP 10 due** and **final class presentations** and peer feedback in project reports.

Dec 2 W: **Final class presentations** and peer feedback on project reports.

Dec 9–14 Final week: Final draft due of formal paper 3 on TBD day