

## COMS 325 Approaches to Communication Research

Concordia University  
Department of Communication Studies  
Dr. Stefanie Duguay  
Fall 2018  
Wednesday 8:45–11:30am, CJ 4.320

**Office Location:** CJ 4.425

**Office Hours:** Wednesdays from 1:00pm – 3:00pm or by appointment

**Email:** stefanie.duguay@concordia.ca

*Include COMS325 in subject line; responses generally sent within 24 business hours.*

### Calendar Description

This course introduces students to the logics of inquiry of the major research approaches used within Communication and Cultural Studies. It familiarizes students with the formation of research questions, the choice of appropriate methodological tools, and the interpretation and reporting of research findings. There is a particular focus on qualitative approaches to field research and discourse and textual analysis.

### Prerequisites

Prerequisite: Registration in Communication and Cultural Studies Major; COMS 225.

### Course Description

Method: “a particular procedure for accomplishing or approaching something, especially a systematic or established one” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018).

What recipes, YouTube tutorials, music scores, and software code all have in common is that they point to a specific way of doing something. We can think of these resources as providing a **method** for carrying out the desired task. Many of us have learned that we make fewer mistakes and reach our end goal more swiftly by following such methods. Similarly, scholars within the humanities and social sciences have developed methods for conducting research in relation to people, societies, and cultures. These methods help to enhance theoretical rigor, ensure that we are not causing harm, and allow us to know that research findings are meaningful. Researchers (yourselves included!) aim to contribute to the wider body of knowledge – that is, to uncover something new – a much bigger task than cooking a meal or nailing a make-up tutorial!

Luckily, there are approaches, tools, tips, and guidelines within Communication and Cultural Studies that provide us with a foundation of how to approach the challenge of uncovering new knowledge. While these fields draw on methods that have been developed over decades, they also increasingly favour dynamic, interdisciplinary approaches over strict templates for research. We will engage with this fluidity of research practices as we learn about approaches to research design, common research methods and tools, as well as analytical techniques. Classes will consist of a lecture and discussion followed by an interactive workshop where you will try out methods and develop your research skills. All research must be underscored by ethical principles and we will learn how to carry out ethical research that respects participants. The course will also provide the chance to enhance your communication skills as we explore ways of disseminating research findings.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This course has been developed with input from Professor Monika Gagnon and other scholars who have provided valuable insights. Thank you for your contributions.

## Course Objectives/Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, you will be able to:

- Demonstrate an understanding of key research concepts and components of research design
- Apply principles of ethical research conduct and reflect upon the researcher's role
- Develop basic research skills and the ability to carry out common methods
- Become familiar with research methods software and digital research methods
- Strengthen analytical thinking, formal writing, and communication skills

## Course Materials

### Required text:

Gaudet, S. & Robert, D. (2018). *A journey through qualitative research: From design to reporting*. London: Sage.

*We will be reading several chapters from this book and it will serve as a core resource for further instruction.*

Not required but also useful:

Lindlof, T. & Taylor, B.C. (2019). *Qualitative communication research methods* (4<sup>th</sup> Edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

*This book will be on reserve in the library.*

The rest of the course readings and related materials will be available through Concordia Reserves (accessible through Moodle). Required readings are listed first for each week; additional readings are provided for further exploration and for application to course assignments. I reserve the right to make changes to the syllabus during the semester as necessary with the goal of fully addressing class needs and improving your learning experience.

## Assignments and Grading

Assignment	Weighting (%)	Due Date
Group Research Proposal	10	Sept. 28
Participation (in-class activities and short submissions in Moodle): 1. Observation Reflection 2. Ethics Certificate 3. Analysis Codebook 4. Group Peer Evaluation	20	Oct. 5 Oct. 16 Nov. 13 Nov. 29
Research Methods Quiz (In-class)	30	Oct. 31
Individual Final Reflection	20	Nov. 20
Group Research Presentation	20	Nov. 21 & 28

### Participation (20%)

Since each class includes an interactive workshop component, participation is essential for developing your research skills during class time. In this course, your participation grade will pertain to your in-class interactions and engagement in activities (note: attendance is essential for participation) as well as the completion of small submissions in Moodle. Further details about these submissions will be discussed in class and posted in Moodle. You will often (but not always) be provided with class time to complete them. I have included the dates of the most

significant Moodle submissions above so that you can plan accordingly, however there may be additional participation tasks to complete. Participation also means coming to class on time and prepared, having completed the readings and tasks required for that week (e.g. pre-installing software) and contributing to in-class discussions and activities.

### **Research Methods Quiz (30%)**

This is an in-class quiz to test your knowledge of key research terms, concepts, and approaches. It will pertain to all content covered up to (but not including) Week 9. We will discuss the quiz format in class.

### **Research Project**

You will have the chance to explore a topic of interest along with other students in order to apply the research methods and concepts that we are learning in class. In a group, you will select a topic that can be investigated within the duration of the course. Together, you will develop a research proposal and, with instructor input and feedback, select and conduct appropriate methods from among those discussed in this course. These can include one or a combination of the following:

- Ethnographic observation in a public space
- Individual and/or focus group interviews
- Social media analysis (analysis of publicly available social media data)
- Archival analysis and/or analysis of publicly available documents (including through the App Walkthrough)
- Visual analysis of publicly available images

With your chosen method(s), your group will carry out data collection, data analysis, and present your findings to the class. Individually, you will submit a final reflection about the project.

The graded components of this project are:

- **Group Research Proposal (10%)** – In your group, you will select a topic and develop a research proposal. See the Research Proposal template and Group Contract template in Moodle. (1,000-1,500 words maximum, excluding reference list and group contract)
- **Group Research Presentation (20%)** – At the end of the semester, your group will present its findings to the rest of the class. You will develop a dynamic and engaging group presentation that includes the components of a research report while demonstrating creativity and the real-world relevance of your topic. See Moodle for the grading sheet and to submit your presentation slides.
- **Individual Final Reflection (20%)** – By yourself, you will submit a reflection on the research process that you carried out. You will begin by summarizing the research design, methods, findings, and discussion. Then you will reflect on the process of conducting your chosen methods and identify anything you would do differently. Also, reflect on your role as a researcher and your influence on the project. See Moodle for grading sheet. (1,500-1,700 words maximum, excluding reference list)

### **Guidelines for all written assignments:**

- Unless otherwise specified, all written work must follow APA formatting and referencing (<https://library.concordia.ca/help/citing/apa.php>)
- Respect the word limit and include your total word count at the end of the paper before your reference list.

- All written work should be in 12-point font, Times New Roman (Arial, Calibri, and Cambria are also acceptable) and double-spaced with regular (MS Word default) page margins
- Include page numbers at the bottom of each page
- Electronic submissions **must** be Microsoft Word documents (**not PDF** or other formats)

**Attendance and participation** – As mentioned earlier, classes will rely on active learning through participation, which will require you to discuss topics with other students and contribute to group work. Through this format, you will learn from each other as well as the lectures and course readings. There will also be some in-class time dedicated to assignment work, peer learning, and presentations – participating during this time will help you to manage the workload for the course and should help to enhance the quality of your assignments. If it is unavoidable that you must miss a class, you must notify me (preferably in advance) so that we can determine how you will learn the material covered.

**Late assignments** – All assignments are due on the date specified and must be submitted in Moodle by the deadline. There will be no make-up date for the in-class quiz or the group presentations. Assignment extensions may be granted only in rare and unavoidable circumstances. If you will require an extension, you must bring this to my attention (in person or by email) **in advance** of the deadline and preferably **one week or more in advance**. If I have not granted an extension, the following late policy will apply: 1 grade point will be deducted from the total grade for every 24 hours that an assignment is late for up to 72 hours (accumulating a maximum 3-point deduction). Assignments more than three days late will receive a **zero** grade. Late assignments may not receive written comments or feedback.

**Questions, emails, and grade reassessment** – If you have a question about any aspect of the course, assignments, readings, or concepts, please ask it in class. It is true that if you have a question, there are likely others in the class with that question too. If you do not wish to ask your question during the class, please discuss it with me immediately following the class or during my office hours. I will stay for 5-10 minutes after class or until I have addressed all questions. Discussing questions in person is the easiest and quickest way to ensure that we are on the same page. If you must send a question by email, you may have to wait up to 24 business hours for a response. I will not discuss grades over email. If you wish for an assignment to be reassessed, you will need to send me a written (one paragraph) argument for why the piece should be reassessed and then arrange an appointment to discuss the assignment with me face-to-face during office hours or after class.

**[Official university policies removed from this version – if you are a student in this course, please use the version distributed to you]**

## **Schedule**

### **WEEK 1: SEPTEMBER 5 – Introduction**

We will get to know a bit about each other and start with the basics: “What even is a method?” “What is research?” “Who is a researcher?” Then we will discuss the topics we’ll cover throughout the semester and develop a clear sense of expectations and responsibilities for the course.

## **WEEK 2: SEPTEMBER 12 – The Knowledge Production Process (Or, how do we know what we know?)**

We will discuss the nature of knowledge, exploring what assumptions and perspectives come into play when we claim to know something. This will set us up for looking at different types of research designs and formulating research questions.

Workshop: This workshop session will focus on clarifying your understanding of research approaches and paradigms. Then we will practice formulating research questions about common topics in Communication and Cultural Studies.

**Required reading:** Gaudet & Robert – Chapter 1 Choosing Qualitative Inquiry, pp. 1-19

Optional readings and video:

- Kovach, M. (2009). Chapter 3 – Epistemology and research: Centring tribal knowledge, pp. 55-74. In *Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations, and contexts*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Collins, P. H. (1989). The social construction of Black feminist thought. *Signs*, 14(4), 745-773.
- Crenshaw, K. (2016). The urgency of intersectionality [TED talk]: [https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle\\_crenshaw\\_the\\_urgency\\_of\\_intersectionality?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality?language=en) [18:50] *Warning: Violent imagery and subject matter*.
- Lindlof, T.R. & Tylor, B.C. (2019). Chapter 1 – Introduction to qualitative communication research, pp. 1-24. In *Qualitative communication research methods* (4<sup>th</sup> edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

*Monday Sept. 17 – Deadline for withdrawal with tuition refund*

## **WEEK 3: SEPTEMBER 19 – Research Design (Or, knowing what you're doing and why)**

We will explore how to design a research project by looking at different research goals, the temporality of research topics, and the kinds of materials or subjects that can be examined. We will discuss choosing a theoretical framework and indicators of validity in qualitative research. Important: We will review the components of a research proposal, which you will be expected to produce in your Group Research Proposal assignment.

Workshop: A library visit with special guest Sonia Poulin, Communications Librarian in **VL122 at 10:30am**.

### **Required reading:**

Gaudet & Robert – Chapter 2 Designing an Iterative Research Project, pp. 20-39

Optional reading:

- Lindlof, T.R. & Tylor, B.C. (2019). Chapter 5 – Design II: Implementing research projects, pp. 125-171. In *Qualitative communication research methods* (4<sup>th</sup> edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

## **WEEK 4: SEPTEMBER 26 – Digital Research Methods & Qualitative Data Analysis Software (Or, the digital is IRL)**

This class will introduce you to the two sides of digital research methods: a) using digital tools to conduct research and b) researching digital objects, spaces, and practices. Acknowledging that there is no separate “virtual world,” we will discuss ways that digital traces reflect broader practices and cultures while also identifying the limitations of research involving digital data.

Workshop: You will become acquainted with MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software, as a tool for storing, organizing and analyzing your data. Then we will use digital tools to collect and conduct preliminary analyses on data from social media platforms.

### **Required reading and video:**

- Rogers, R. (2013). The end of the virtual: Digital methods, pp.19-38. In *Digital Methods*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Available online through Concordia library: <https://clues.concordia.ca/record=b3085467>
- Watch: MIT Technology Review. (2013). Kate Crawford: Big Data gets personal [YouTube video]: <https://youtu.be/JltwkXiBBTU> [17:34]

### **Optional readings and video:**

- boyd, d., & Crawford, K. (2012). Critical questions for Big Data. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(5), 662-679.
- Burgess, J. & Bruns, A. (2015). Easy data, hard data: The politics and pragmatics of Twitter research after the computational turn. In G. Langlois, J., Redden, & Elmer, G. (Eds.), *Compromised data: From social media to big data*, pp. 93-111. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Bruns, A. (2018). Facebook shuts the gate after the horse has bolted, and hurts real research in the process. *Internet Policy Review*. Retrieved from: <https://policyreview.info/articles/news/facebook-shuts-gate-after-horse-has-bolted-and-hurts-real-research-process/786>
- Watch: MAXQDA VERBI. (2017). MAXQDA 2018 – Getting Started video [YouTube video]: <https://youtu.be/hJhBK3CDF9U> [9:59]

**\*\*\*Group Research Proposal due in Moodle on September 28 by 9:00pm\*\*\***

## **WEEK 5: OCTOBER 3 – Observation and Ethnography (Or, discovering people in spaces)**

Ethnography can be understood as a way of deepening our understanding of cultures through a combination of methods, and observation is one of the key methods in ethnography. We will discuss the nuances of ethnography, looking at how it is often conducted through a process of gaining access and becoming an insider. Then we will look at different techniques of observation.

Workshop: In groups, you will carry out an observation in a digital or physical space. Using the techniques discussed in class, you will identify the relationships, norms, rules, and roles of individuals in these settings.

**Participation Assignment:** Based on your field notes, you will complete a short task in Moodle. It is best to attempt this assignment as soon as possible following your observation but you will have until **October 5<sup>th</sup> at 9:00pm** to submit it.

**Required reading:** Gaudet & Robert – “Ethnography” in Chapter 3, pp. 66-75 AND “Observation” in Chapter 4, pp. 79-91

Optional reading and video:

- Hine, C. (2017). Ethnography and the Internet: Taking account of emerging technological landscapes. *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 10(3), 315-329. (strongly recommended)
- Watch: University of Surrey. (2013). Christine Hine on online research methods [YouTube video]: <https://youtu.be/No8RZOebhX8> [7:19]

*Monday, Oct. 8 – Thanksgiving Day (university closed)*

### **WEEK 6: OCTOBER 10 – Research Ethics (Or, not causing harm)**

Important: **NO CLASS THIS WEEK.** Complete the Government of Canada’s *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2)* online research ethics tutorial. In total, this tutorial should take about the same amount of time as you would spend on readings and class for this week.

Create an account here: <http://tcps2core.ca/welcome>

**Participation Assignment:** Once you have completed the tutorial, submit a copy of your completion certificate in Moodle by 9:00pm on **October 16<sup>th</sup>**.

Optional reading and video:

- Gaudet & Robert – Chapter 5 – Ethical Challenges in Qualitative Research, pp. 121-137
- Markham, A. & Buchanan, E. (2012). Ethical decision-making and Internet research: Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee (Version 2.0). *Association of Internet Researchers*. Retrieved from: <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf>
- Watch: Grunge. (2017). The untold truth of the Stanford Prison Experiment [YouTube video]: <https://youtu.be/DsWJPNhLCUU> [7:39]

### **WEEK 7: OCTOBER 17 – Interview Methods (Or, talking to people)**

We will discuss different types of interviews, from focus groups to one-on-one interviews, and the forms these can take (e.g. structured, semi-structured). We will get into the nitty gritty of developing an interview guide, creating effective questions, and practicing active listening. We will also explore the use of technology to conduct interviews and the ways that photos and digital media can be paired with interviews to help participants share their stories.

Workshop: We will develop interview guides in class and then you will get a chance to conduct individual interviews and focus group interviews.

**Required reading:** Gaudet & Robert – “Interviews” in Chapter 4, pp. 92-107

Optional reading:

- Gubrium, J.F., Holstein, J.A., Marvasti, A.B. & McKinney, K.D. (Eds.) (2012). *The Sage handbook of interview research: The complexity of the craft*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Available online through Concordia library: <http://0-methods.sagepub.com/mercury.concordia.ca/book/handbook-of-interview-research-2e>
- Kvale, S. (2007). *Doing interviews*. London: Sage. Available online through Concordia library: <http://0-dx.doi.org/mercury.concordia.ca/10.4135/9781849208963>
- Robards, B. & Lincoln, S. (2017). Uncovering longitudinal life narratives: Scrolling back on Facebook. *Qualitative Research*, 17(6), 715-730.

## **WEEK 8: OCTOBER 24 – The App Walkthrough and Collecting Documents, Media, and Research Materials (Or, researching things and stuff)**

This class will focus on a specific method, the app walkthrough, to understand how researchers collect texts and materials for analysis. We will discuss the use of documents and archival materials in Communication and Cultural Studies research, paying attention to the ways that official documents, software interfaces, and objects can play a role as non-human actors in a research site.

Workshop: In groups, you will conduct a comparative app walkthrough, examining the mediator characteristics of two apps from the same genre. Bring your mobile phone and, if necessary, phone charger to class.

### **Required reading:**

- Light, B., Burgess, J., & Duguay, S. (2018). The walkthrough method: An approach to the study of apps. *New Media & Society*, 20(3), 881-900.

### Optional reading and resources:

- Gaudet & Robert – “Documents” in Chapter 4, pp. 107-117 (strongly recommended)
- Hill, M. (1993). Chapter 1 Introduction & Chapter 2 Archival Sedimentation. In *Archival Strategies and Techniques*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Available through the Sage Research Methods website through Concordia Library (need to be on-campus, or else have an active VPN from off campus to access): <http://methods.sagepub.com/book/archival-strategies-and-techniques>
- Library and Archives Canada Website: <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/Pages/home.aspx>

## **WEEK 9: OCTOBER 31 – Methods Quiz and Textual Analysis (Or, interpreting pop culture)**

The quiz will take place during the first half of class. In the second half, we will discuss the use of textual analysis for examining “texts” – anything from which people make meaning, including television programs, newspapers, magazines, and other forms of media (McKee, 2001; 2003). Our workshop will take the form of collectively viewing texts and analyzing them.

### **Required reading:**

- McKee, A. (2001). A beginner’s guide to textual analysis. *Metro, Autumn/Winter* (127/128), pages 140-149 (starting at “What is textual analysis?”).

## **WEEK 10: NOVEMBER 7 – Analyzing Research Materials (Or, finding meaning in chaos)**

Now that you have collected research materials (e.g. interviews, documents, etc.), we will discuss how to analyze them. Exploring two popular approaches, grounded theory and discourse analysis, we will look at the steps involved in developing concepts and making sense of your data.

Workshop: As a class, we will work through some examples of different types of materials (interviews, images) and examine them using discourse analysis and grounded theory approaches. In your research project groups, you will begin to analyze your materials in MAXQDA, developing codes and categories as they emerge. **You will submit a version of your initial codebook in Moodle by November 13 at 9:00pm.**

#### Required reading and video:

- Lindlof, T.R. & Tylor, B.C. (2019). Chapter 9 – Sensemaking I: Analyzing, coding, and managing data, **pp. 308-324 only**. In *Qualitative communication research methods* (4<sup>th</sup> edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Schneider, F. (2013). Introduction to discourse analysis [YouTube video]: <https://youtu.be/NpJhICZczUQ>

#### Optional readings:

- Gaudet & Robert – “Grounded theory” and “Discourse analysis” in Chapter 3 – Choosing an approach to guide methodological decisions, pp. 48-59.
- Rose, G. (2016). Chapter 8 – Discourse analysis I: Text, intertextuality and context. In *Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials* (4<sup>th</sup> edition), pp. 186-219. London: Sage.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). London: Sage.

### **WEEK 11: NOVEMBER 14 – Theorizing and Presenting Findings (Or, making sense of it all)**

We will explore different ways of stepping back from your initial analysis and seeing the bigger picture: the overarching meanings, concepts, and categories conveyed by your materials. We will also discuss how to write up and share your findings in ways that acknowledge your role in their interpretation (reflexivity), as well as the study’s limitations, while still driving home the value of your research.

Workshop: This will be a **peer feedback** session. Within your research project groups, you will discuss the concepts and findings emerging from your analysis. You will explain your research and findings to another group to gather their insights and feedback. You will then switch roles and provide feedback to this group on their project. Further instructions will be provided in class.

**Required reading:** Gaudet & Robert – Chapter 9 – Theorizing and Presenting the Results, pp. 197-220

#### Optional reading:

- Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don’t: Researcher’s position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 15(2), 219-234. (strongly recommended)
- Tracy, S.J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837-851.

- Lindlof, T.R. & Tylor, B.C. (2019). Chapter 10 – Sensemaking II: Creating, evaluating, and enhancing interpretations of data, pp. 340-369. In *Qualitative communication research methods* (4<sup>th</sup> edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

**\*\*\*Individual Final Reflection Due in Moodle by 9:00pm November 20\*\*\***

**WEEK 12: NOVEMBER 21 – Group Presentations (Or, sharing findings with the public!)**

See Moodle for further instructions about group presentations. Submit your slides on the day of your presentation.

**WEEK 13: NOVEMBER 28 – Group Presentations and Wrap Up (Or, this is what we learned)**

**\*\*\*Group Peer Evaluations due in Moodle by 9:00pm on November 29\*\*\***

*Monday, Dec. 3 – Last day of classes for Fall term*