

BRIDGING THEORY AND PRACTICE: TEACHING QUALITATIVE FIELD RESEARCH METHODS IN SOCIOLOGY AND CRIMINOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the structure and pedagogical framework of the Field Research Methods course offered during Winter 2024 at the University of Waterloo. Designed to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, the course introduced students to foundational qualitative research methodologies central to sociology and criminology. Through a combination of lectures, experiential assignments, and reflective practices, students engaged in methods such as in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and digital ethnography. Ethical reflexivity was a core focus, ensuring students were equipped to address the complexities of real-world research with critical awareness and integrity. The article details the course's objectives, instructional strategies, and assessment methods, emphasizing its transformative impact on students' learning experiences. Additionally, it discusses planned future enhancements, highlighting the course's commitment to adaptability and continuous improvement, further solidifying its role in preparing students for both academic and professional research pursuits.

Keywords: qualitative research, field research methods, sociology and criminology, research methods education, ethical reflexivity

In an era where the complexities of social phenomena increasingly demand nuanced and contextually rich analyses, qualitative research methods have emerged as indispensable tools for sociologists and criminologists. The qualitative research methods course Field Research Methods (LS/SOC 322) at the University of Waterloo is a cornerstone of the university's sociology and criminology programs. Research has shown that qualitative research remains vital for understanding the nuances and complexities inherent to social life (Creswell, 2013; Lim, 2024; Van den Hoonaard & Van den Scott, 2021). However, there is a growing need to ensure that students are aware of qualitative methodologies and proficient in applying them in real-world scenarios. This article discusses the Winter 2024 offering of Field Research Methods, which provided students with experiential learning opportunities through methods such as in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and digital ethnography. Students engaged directly with the research process through these techniques, fostering a deeper understanding of methodological frameworks and their applications. The course emphasized ethical considerations, critical thinking, and reflexivity, ensuring that students were competent in designing and conducting qualitative research and attuned to the moral complexities inherent in sociological and criminological inquiry. By the end of the semester, students were expected to produce methodologically sound research projects, bridging the gap between theoretical foundations and practical application. This paper reflects on the course's structure, instructional

strategies, and assessment methods, offering insights into its pedagogical impact and potential future enhancements. The article begins by providing an overview of the institutional context and course objectives. It outlines the course's pedagogical framework, structure, and assessment methods, then discusses its broader educational impact. The article concludes with future directions and a summary of its contributions to qualitative research education.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT AND COURSE OVERVIEW: BRIDGING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING WITH QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The University of Waterloo (UW) is recognized as one of Canada's premier institutions, with a student body of approximately 42,000 undergraduate and graduate students (University of Waterloo, 2024). Known for its innovative approach to education, UW is renowned for its cooperative education programs, which are the largest of their kind globally. The emphasis on experiential learning aligns with the goals of the Field Research Methods course, which is a key offering in the Department of Sociology and Legal Studies. The interdisciplinary department allows students to explore various social and legal issues from multiple perspectives, making it an ideal environment for students to develop qualitative research skills. Accredited by the Ministry of Colleges and Universities, Ontario, UW ensures that all its programs meet the province's rigorous academic standards.

The Winter 2024 offering of the Field Research Methods course was delivered in a traditional face-to-face format, with classes held twice weekly. Hybrid office hours were offered to support diverse learning needs, allowing students to access guidance in both in-person and virtual settings. Prerequisites for the course included an introductory Research Methods (SOC/LS 221) course. This iteration of the course reflected recent advancements in qualitative research methodologies while maintaining accessibility for students who had completed foundational coursework in research methods and sociology or legal studies. Designed to prepare students for the complexities of applied research, the course emphasized ethical considerations, particularly when engaging with marginalized or vulnerable populations, equipping them with the tools needed to navigate real-world research challenges in sociology and criminology.

The course included a comprehensive assessment strategy, integrating formative and summative evaluations to provide students with a robust understanding of qualitative research methods. At the outset, students were required to complete the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2: CORE-2022) certification, equipping them with a strong ethical foundation essential for conducting research in academic and professional contexts. Assignments included a three-page research proposal, in-depth interviews, a non-participatory observational study (in-person or digital), and a final research proposal, which allowed students to engage with core qualitative methodologies. Each assignment was paired with reflective components, enabling students to critically evaluate their learning and the development of their research skills.

COMPREHENSIVE FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHING A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS COURSE

The Field Research Methods course was structured around a comprehensive pedagogical framework centered on three interconnected pillars: conceptual grounding, practical engagement, and ethical reflexivity. Together, these pillars provide a cohesive structure that integrates theory, practice, and critical reflection, equipping students to navigate the complexities of qualitative research effectively.

Conceptual Grounding

The course began by establishing a solid foundation in qualitative paradigms, emphasizing their distinctive characteristics compared to quantitative approaches. Students were introduced to key theoretical concepts, including interpretivism, constructivism, and critical theory, which served as the underpinnings of qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The foundational knowledge situated students within the intellectual traditions that shaped the methodologies they later practiced through their assignments. A critical component of this pillar involved examining the historical and sociopolitical contexts of qualitative research, highlighting its role in amplifying marginalized voices (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Students engaged with guided discussions of case studies that demonstrated the transformative potential of qualitative research in real-world applications. For instance, criminological case studies illustrated how ethnographic methods had yielded unique insights into gang cultures and prison systems (Presser & Sandberg, 2015). These examples prompted students to critically assess the advantages of qualitative approaches in uncovering nuanced dimensions of social phenomena that quantitative methods might overlook.

Practical Engagement

The second pillar emphasized practical engagement, allowing students to actively apply qualitative research methods in diverse settings. Assignments were scaffolded to incrementally build students' competencies, beginning with foundational tasks such as formulating research questions and advancing to comprehensive research projects involving data collection and analysis. Through hands-on activities, students were introduced to qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and digital ethnography, with class time deliberately designed to simulate real-world research challenges. For instance, during a class activity focused on non-participant observation, students were asked to observe interactions in a chosen public setting on campus, such as a coffee shop or library. The subsequent feedback session encouraged students to critically reflect on their positionality, potential biases, and the inherent limitations of observational methods. This exercise was a low-stakes introduction to non-participatory observational research, preparing students for more advanced applications in their graded assignments.

As Forberg and Schilt (2023) emphasize, the migration of social life to online platforms necessitates the integration of digital ethnography and related methods into contemporary qualitative research training. To address this, a week was dedicated to digital ethnography, during which students were introduced to the unique challenges and opportunities of studying online communities. Platforms such as Reddit and YouTube were examined to explore how digital spaces shape identity construction, foster community dynamics, and mirror real-world interactions in virtual contexts. To enhance this module, a guest speaker was invited to talk on the digital walkthrough method, a novel approach that allows researchers to analyze digital platforms by examining their design, functionalities, and user interactions (see Light et al., 2018). This method offered valuable insights into how platforms are constructed and the reasons behind specific design choices, allowing students to engage with cutting-edge methodologies in digital research.

Ethical Reflexivity

The final pillar of the course concentrated on ethical reflexivity, a fundamental aspect of qualitative research. Researchers have asserted that reflexivity—defined as the ongoing critical examination of a researcher’s influence on the research process and its outcomes—is vital for establishing trustworthiness and ensuring the rigor of qualitative studies (Guba, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Lim, 2024; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As mentioned earlier, to cultivate a robust ethical foundation, all students were required to complete the TCPS 2: CORE-2022 certification in the first two weeks of the course. This proactive approach was complemented by embedding ethics throughout the curriculum, ensuring students engaged with ethical considerations as an integral part of their learning process. Furthermore, students were required to write a one-page reflective piece after each assignment. These reflections encouraged them to evaluate their research processes critically, examine their contributions to broader academic and societal contexts, and identify areas for improvement. This reflexivity prompted students to explore ethical and methodological complexities beyond the technical aspects of research. In doing so, they addressed challenges such as informed consent, participant confidentiality, and power dynamics, enhancing their understanding of how their positionality influences research outcomes.

DISCUSSION

The Field Research Methods course framework exemplifies an innovative approach to qualitative research education by addressing the often-overlooked intersection of theory, practice, and ethics. Unlike traditional research methods courses that prioritize theoretical instruction or technical skill-building in isolation, this framework integrates these elements to create a holistic and transformative learning experience.

Bridging the Theory-Practice Divide

One of the central achievements of this framework was its ability to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. By grounding students in the theoretical foundations of qualitative research, the course provided a strong intellectual framework to guide their practice. For instance, students were asked to develop research questions explicitly aligned with interpretive or constructivist paradigms, a step often overlooked in practice-oriented courses. This process was reinforced through in-class discussions and graded assignments where students analyzed case studies illustrating how theoretical paradigms influence methodological decisions, such as selecting research settings or interpreting findings.

While some students initially found integrating abstract theoretical concepts with their practical work challenging, structured feedback sessions and scaffolded assignments helped them navigate this complexity. By emphasizing this alignment, the course ensured that their research methodologies were technically sound and theoretically informed—a hallmark of high-quality qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This approach cultivated a deeper understanding of qualitative research, preparing students to engage critically with academic and applied research contexts.

Experiential Learning and Skill Development

The emphasis on experiential learning transforms the classroom into a dynamic space for skill acquisition. Assignments like interviews, observational studies, and digital ethnography projects were not merely academic exercises; they simulated the complexities of real-world research. This approach resonates with Kolb's (2015) experiential learning theory, which posits that deep learning occurs when students engage directly with tasks, reflect on their experiences, and apply insights to new challenges. While experiential learning fosters skill acquisition and critical thinking, critics argue that it may prioritize practical applications at the expense of theoretical depth (Illeris, 2018). The course mitigated this tension by grounding practical exercises within robust theoretical paradigms, ensuring students develop both the intellectual and technical proficiencies necessary for qualitative inquiry. A key example of this experiential approach was the paired interview assignment. Students were paired and alternated roles between interviewer and participant, giving them firsthand experience in conducting interviews while simultaneously understanding the perspective of a research participant. This dual-role activity honed their skills in developing and asking research questions. It deepened their appreciation for the nuances of qualitative data collection, such as establishing rapport, active listening, and ethical considerations.

Additionally, the inclusion of emerging methodologies, such as digital ethnography, reflected the forward-thinking nature of the course. As qualitative research increasingly intersects with technology, students must be equipped to navigate this evolving landscape. By emphasizing methods like digital ethnography, the course prepared students to tackle pressing research

questions in digital contexts on topics such as misinformation, online radicalization, and virtual identity construction.

Ethical Awareness as a Pedagogical Imperative

Ethical reflexivity was a central pillar of the course, embedded throughout the curriculum to ensure students engaged critically with the ethical dimensions of qualitative research. The course challenged students to navigate real-world dilemmas, such as obtaining informed consent, managing power dynamics, and safeguarding participant confidentiality. These challenges were not treated as abstract concepts but were built into assignments and class activities that required students to engage with ethical complexities in their research practices critically. For instance, during a non-participatory observation activity on campus, students worked in groups of three to analyze social interactions in public spaces. This exercise required students to consider ethical issues, such as respecting individuals' privacy in public settings and maintaining a neutral stance as observers. Reflections revealed that many students unconsciously focused on details aligned with their assumptions, overlooking other critical aspects of their observed interactions. Feedback sessions highlighted these blind spots, as peers often identified elements others had missed. This process encouraged students to critically assess their biases and positionality and reinforced the importance of adopting an open-minded and collaborative approach to research.

By embedding ethics across all stages of the research process, the course addressed critiques that traditional research methods curricula often underemphasize the moral complexities of qualitative inquiry, leaving students unprepared for real-world challenges (Orb et al., 2001). This pedagogical approach cultivated critical reflexivity, preparing students to approach their research with heightened sensitivity to representation, confidentiality, and positionality. These experiences equipped them for academic and professional research contexts, ensuring they could navigate ethical challenges confidently and with nuance.

FUTURE PLANS FOR THE COURSE

Future iterations of the Field Research Methods course will integrate emerging technologies to prepare students for the increasingly digital nature of qualitative research. The curriculum will introduce computational grounded theory (Nelson, 2020), a cutting-edge approach that utilizes machine learning to identify patterns in qualitative data, enabling students to analyze complex datasets with greater precision. Additionally, advanced digital ethnography techniques will be expanded, equipping students to investigate online communities and virtual interactions with methodological rigor. These updates aim to position students at the forefront of qualitative research, ensuring they can address contemporary challenges with innovative, technologically informed methods.

Experiential learning opportunities will be expanded to enhance the course's relevance and impact. Collaborations with local agencies will enable students to apply their research skills to

pressing societal issues, fostering a deeper connection between academic knowledge and community engagement. Guest lecturers from academic, policy, and professional fields will provide diverse perspectives on applying qualitative methods, from policy analysis to organizational research. Periodic updates to the curriculum, informed by student feedback and advancements in the field, will ensure the course remains at the forefront of qualitative research education. Recent innovations, such as peer review sessions and data analysis workshops, have already enhanced learning outcomes, setting the stage for continued growth and adaptation.

CONCLUSION

The University of Waterloo's Field Research Methods course demonstrates the critical role of qualitative research education in equipping students with theoretical insights and practical skills. The course provides a transformative learning experience that bridges the gap between academic knowledge and real-world application by integrating conceptual grounding, hands-on engagement, and ethical reflexivity. Students emerge with a deeper understanding of qualitative methodologies, their relevance in addressing complex social phenomena, and the ethical challenges inherent in sociological and criminological research. With plans to incorporate emerging technologies and expand experiential opportunities, the course is well-positioned to remain at the cutting edge of qualitative research education, preparing students to navigate and contribute to a rapidly evolving research landscape.

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