Course title

B5. Writing Ethnographic and other Qualitative-Interpretive Research: An Inductive Approach

Instructor details
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Short Bio

Dvora Yanow is a policy and organisational ethnographer and interpretive methodologist whose research and teaching are shaped by an overall interest in the communication of meaning in organisational and policy settings. Holder of the 2005-2010 term Strategic Chair in Meaning and Method, Faculty of Social Sciences, VU University Amsterdam, she is presently Visiting Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences, Communication Science Department, Wageningen University and at the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences, University of Amsterdam, in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology.
http://wur.academia.edu/DvoraYanow

Short course outline

This seminar explores issues in one of the ‘genres’ of academic writing: ethnographic and other forms of interpretive-qualitative research. The course will proceed inductively, working from published empirical research to more general observations about how texts convince, treating those articles as data for our analyses of writing. The course is intended for those who have field data in hand and are starting to write research papers, at whatever level (doctoral student, post-docs, Assistant Professors, ).

Long course outline

After returning from field research, have you caught yourself feeling that you have mounds and mounds of field data and wondering how you might possibly organise them into a research paper or article? Have you wondered how some articles, out of all those submitted to peer-reviewed journals, get selected for publication, and why? Have you thought about things that authors might do to enhance their chances of getting their work accepted?

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Due to time constraints, both for preparing for the course and for discussion in the sessions, we will focus on articles, rather than monographs; but what we can learn from reading research articles and studying their structure and components translates to book-length manuscripts. The articles selected for reading appear in leading journals, demonstrating that such research, when ‘appropriately’ written (i.e., making a persuasive case by presenting methods that meet the standards of that epistemic methodological community, in a transparent, persuasive fashion), can be accepted for publication in top tier journals.

One of the key questions we will explore is how writing presents data in ways that are more (or less) likely to convince readers of the trustworthiness of research insights or findings, as well as of the researcher her- or himself. We will also discuss differences between writing papers that present empirical research and those that develop theoretical arguments and how the writing strategy changes, specifically with regard to the logic of the relationship between theorizing and empirical material. We will spend a bit of time on the journal submission process, including how to think about choosing a journal, and we may look at the trajectory of a writing career around the question of a publishing strategy. Because many of these questions entail personal choices on the part of an author, a selection of the readings represents publications from the instructor’s own research stream, the better to interrogate her strategies, rather than trying to second-guess an absent author’s choices.

An advanced course in interpretive methodology and methods, this is intended for those with an interest in those approaches who are engaged in writing scientific papers, articles, chapters, and books on their empirical research. Participants are expected to have a basic knowledge of interpretive methodologies and methods; a suggested list of background readings follows below.

In short, this course aims to help you:
1. Understand what is central in writing ethnographic and other forms of interpretive-qualitative research;
2. Learn how to read an article for its writing logic and style, in addition to for its content;
3. Have an enhanced ability to assess your own writing as well as others’ work.

Depending on how many students enroll in the course, we may have the possibility of workshopping students’ own writings during class sessions. In any event, small working groups will be formed for students to apply course concepts to one another’s work [and thereby, on their own] during non-class time.

Course readings

Readings assigned for discussion in class meetings need to be read before the seminar! We will engage in a ‘close reading’ of them, together, in the seminar sessions, focusing on their structure and on specific sections. These analyses will only make their fullest sense if you have already read the material.

As you think about and read the articles on assignment, you might keep the following questions in mind. These signal the theoretical approach we will be taking:

1. Is the research presented in this article trustworthy? Why/why not? [Hint: Compare it with other articles.]
2. Look at the methods section. What “tools” or “techniques” are presented there that might lead you to consider the research trustworthy?
3. Look at the article itself. What “tools” or “techniques,” “evaluative standards” or “criteria” are used in the writing that might lead you to consider the research trustworthy?

4. Looking at both the article overall and the methods section specifically, are any of these elements missing that, in your view, detract from the trustworthiness of the research?

Please bring the daily readings [see literature list] with you to class!

Note: Because of copyright restrictions, you may need to obtain copies of these readings on your own; I cannot make them available to you – although I will explore with the School office whether they will obtain a site license for them. The same holds for the background readings listed below.

**Background readings**, reflecting the general approach to social science writing on which this course rests and the theoretical background that informs it. You will get more out of the course if you read these before coming:


For other ["deep"] background readings, see list at the end of the syllabus.

**Assignment: To be done before the course begins**

Course readings have been selected for their utility in demonstrating some of the key themes that we will discuss; but these are not necessarily in your own field of inquiry – nor can we cover all of the fields in which course participant’s work. This assignment, therefore, seeks to provide each participant with an opportunity to explore her or his own area of research and publication – and we will all learn from this as we see ways in which various journals treat research writing.

1. Before the first meeting of the course, identify an **empirical research** article in your field of research which has been published in a peer-reviewed journal. This could be an article in a journal you would like to publish in; it could be by one of your favorite authors; it could be a favorite for some other reason; or you may select it for entirely different reasons.

2. Please bring copies of the article with you to class in sufficient numbers that all course members can look on as we examine it.

3. Prepare your analysis of the article, which you will present in class. Aim for about 5 minutes. Your analysis should roughly follow these steps:

   - note title, subtitle, anything of interest at the opening
   - track the outline of the article, by headings/subheadings
   - note how the argument is set up [particular words, rhetoric, …]; identify the scientific ‘plot line’
- examine the methods section for the research strategy
- note anything else of interest

If you are not used to reading articles this way, this may sound quite vague. We will model this kind of analysis the first time we meet and continue with it throughout the course, so it should be clear after that first session.

4. In addition, please try to obtain a hard copy of an issue from that same journal, and bring this with you as well. [This may be an issue other than the one in which the article appears.] You might borrow one from the library or perhaps from someone who subscribes to the journal.

In the event that you cannot find a hard copy, please print out the ‘masthead’ [the list of editors and editorial board members], table of contents, and any other information that is relevant to publishing in that journal [e.g., instructions to authors].

**Requested prior knowledge**

Participants should be engaged in writing up their field research – those are the people who will gain most from this course and who will have the most to contribute. If you are not yet at that stage, I suggest waiting for another time to take it. I will assume that participants are familiar with field research and interpretive-qualitative methodological presuppositions and methods, and why it is that a field researcher does what s/he does. For those without such background, see the reading list that follows, below. The course is not appropriate for those writing up quantitative research.

**Software used**

NONE

**Day-to-day schedule (Monday 17 February to Friday 22 February)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session Topic and Readings</th>
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| Mon | 18.2 | 9 – 10.30 | **On writing for Aunt Molly and others: Anticipating readers, publishing outlets, and journal, ‘disciplinary’, and ‘national’ styles, and positioning ethnography**  
**Remember to bring the articles with you!!!** |
|     |      | 11 – 12.30 | **Comparative writing analysis I**  
| Tues  | 19.2 | 9 – 10.30 | **Comparative writing analysis II**


[Also worth looking at from Orr’s opus, but we will not discuss it: Orr, Julian E. 1998. Images of work. *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 23/4: 439-55. It would also be interesting to compare this article, from the perspective of ‘writing up,’ with his full-length ethnography, *Talking about Machines: An ethnography of a modern job*, Cornell University Press, 1996.]


| Weds  | 20.2 | 9 – 10.30 | **Working with your own field and its journals I**

In class: We will discuss the articles you have found. Bring a copy to class to share, so that everyone can have one [or, at most, two people on one copy; see assignment].

| 11 – 12.30 | **Working with your own field and its journals II**

| Thurs | 21.2 | 9 – 10.30 | **Should I tell them I’m doing ethnographic research? Am I...???”**


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<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Details</th>
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<tr>
<td>Fri 22.2</td>
<td>Publishing: Researching a prospective journal outlet</td>
<td>Which journals are most likely to publish organizational ethnography? How are you going to find out? Bring a hard copy of an issue of the journal in which ‘your’ article was published to class [see assignment].</td>
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Yanow, Dvora. 1996. *How does a policy mean?* Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press. TOC [will be handed out]  
| 11 – 12.30 | Developing a ‘writing career’: Positioning one’s work; moving from substance to method; review articles? new field settings? | Stephen Barley’s publication list @ [http://www.stanford.edu/group/WTO/cgi-bin/cv.php?ln=barley](http://www.stanford.edu/group/WTO/cgi-bin/cv.php?ln=barley) – to be analyzed from the end, up! Please either bring a hard copy to class or bring it on your laptop. |

**Additional literature**
I. Background readings on interpretive methodologies and methods

Knowledge of interpretive methodological presuppositions is central background for this course, as there will not be time to go into this background in depth. Some useful readings on the topic, which is enormous, include:


Yanow, Dvora and Schwartz-Shea, Peregrine, eds. 2006. *Interpretation and method: Empirical research methods and the interpretive turn*. Armonk, NY: M E Sharpe, esp. introduction, chs. 1-5, 21, 22. [see the reference list for additional readings; a 2nd edition is in press and due out in 2013]

II. Background readings – Writing as ‘world-making’: The rhetorics of science

(Science = persuasion = rhetoric)

(* designates key readings)


[but see review by Paul Atkinson in *Qualitative Research* 8: 260-1 (2008)]


**IIA. Normative/prescriptive works**


And this source: [http://www.dur.ac.uk/writingacrossboundaries/writingonwriting/](http://www.dur.ac.uk/writingacrossboundaries/writingonwriting/). Many leading sociologists and anthropologists are included there; some of the essays are enlightening, a couple are amusing, and some contain what in my view is bad advice [e.g., not to split infinitives: this is an old-wives’ tale].

**Lecture room requirement**

A ROOM ARRANGED IN SEMINAR STYLE.

**Preferred time slots**

MORNING, PLEASE! [9-12]