



2023 Doctoral Winter School

13 – 17 February

14.00 – 18.00 (CET, Ljubljana)

Research and theorising using observation and interviews (ECTS: 4)

VAUGHN Tan, University College London

Aims of the course:

This course provides students with an introduction to research and theorizing based on data collected through observation (of which ethnography is one type) and interview methods.

The course is designed for quantitative, mixed-method, or qualitative doctoral students and academic researchers who have an interest in exploring or implementing ethnographic and/or interview-based data collection and theorising in their research.

By the end of the course, students will:

1. Understand, at a high level, observation and interviews as qualitative research methods with distinctive epistemological assumptions.
2. Understand the types of research questions for which observation and interviews are appropriate (and inappropriate).
3. Understand the theory and practice of finding sites, gaining access, and collecting data for ethnography and interviews.
4. Have had practical experience of collecting primary research data using ethnography and interview methods.
5. Have had practical experience of writing up primary data from observations and interviews, and developing emergent insights and theory from this primary data.

Course syllabus:

SESSION 1: FOUNDATIONS

This session covers the epistemology of ethnographic and interview-based research and the types of research questions or areas for which observation/interview research is appropriate.

Readings:

1. Bansal, P. & Corley, K. 2012. What's different about qualitative research? *Academy of Management Journal*, 55(3): 509-513
2. Gephardt, R. 2004. Qualitative research and the *Academy of Management Journal*. *Academy of Management Journal*, 7(4): 454-462.
3. Edmondson, A.C. and McManus, S.E., 2007. Methodological fit in management field research. *Academy of Management Review*, 32(4): 1246-1264.



Assignment 1:

In the context of Ljubljana, think about a broad research area which you would like to try to investigate using both ethnographic and interview techniques. This can be related or unrelated to your current area of research interest. Remember that the research area you choose will be the focus of your assignments for this course—please read the instructions for Assignments 2-5 **before** you complete Assignment 1. Write a **short paragraph** answer for each for these four questions (you should have four short paragraphs in total; a short paragraph usually contains fewer than 200 words):

1. Describe the broad research area you are interested in for this assignment. A research area does not have to be a question.
2. Using clearly cited ideas from the readings, explain why you believe this research area is appropriate for ethnographic investigation.
3. Using clearly cited ideas from the readings, explain why you believe this research area is appropriate for interview-based investigation.
4. List 3-5 possible research questions in this area you could try to answer using observations and interviews. Be clear which questions you believe are answerable using observations, interviews, or both. All research questions must end with a question mark.

Assignment 1 is due by upload to the course Dropbox folder by 1200 CET on the day of Session 1.

SESSION 2: OBSERVING PEOPLE DOING THINGS

This session covers the experience of being in an observation setting, collecting observational data, and transforming observational data into description.

Readings:

1. Emerson, R.M., R.I. Fretz, and L.L. Shaw. 1995. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p1-65 (ch 1-3)
2. Geertz, C., 1973. Thick Description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. In *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.

Assignment 2:

1. Choose a location that you will be allowed to observe for 3-5 hours. You will probably learn more by choosing a location where people are doing interdependent work that you don't understand perfectly, and where you *cannot* easily observe everything that is going on. Observe this location for at least 3 hours (preferably, but not necessarily, consecutively), and make notes about what you observe in any form you choose (written, audio, drawings, photographs, etc).
2. **Drawing on your fieldnotes and recordings, describe in prose (not bullet points) what you observed and try to articulate why you found it interesting. You should write 1500-2000 words.**

Come to class prepared to describe your setting and present your findings, and to discuss the experience of observation and analysis of field notes.



Assignment 2 is due by upload to the course Dropbox folder by 1200 CET on the day of Session 1.

SESSION 3: REFLECTING ON OBSERVING; PREPARING TO INTERVIEW

This session covers a) reflection and analysis of observational data and b) preparations for interviews.

Readings:

1. Locke, K., Golden-Biddle, K., & Feldman, M. S. 2008. Perspective-making doubt generative: rethinking the role of doubt in the research process. *Organization Science*, 19(6), 907-918.
2. Arsel, Z. 2018. Asking Questions with Reflexive Focus: A Tutorial on Designing and Conducting Interviews, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 44, 939-48.
3. Weiss, R. 1994. *Learning from Strangers*. New York: Free Press. PDF contains 1-120; read 39-56, other pages optional but recommended.

Assignment 3:

Assignment 3 has two separate parts (3A and 3B), which should be submitted as separate documents.

Assignment 3A: Observation reflections

Assignment 3A should contain your answers to the following questions in relation to Assignment 2, in prose (not bullet points):

1. 100-300 words: Describe your attention in the field. To whom did you pay attention? What did you pay attention to? Where and when did you pay attention? Why did you choose these targets for your attention?
2. 200-400 words: What did you choose to record in your fieldnotes? Why?
3. 100-200 words: How did you decide what focus on in writing Assignment 2?
4. 100 words: What do you think your observations are a case of?

Come to class ready to present and discuss your reflections on observation.

Assignment 3B: Preparing for interviews

Assignment 3B and Assignment 4 ask you to conduct a pair of semi-structured 30-45-minute interviews, describe how you prepared to do these interviews, and then articulate your findings. A semi-structured interview uses a prepared protocol, but you are free to deviate from the protocol. **Writing assignment instructions in boldface.**

Instructions:

1. Decide what type of respondent you want to interview based on your research area and specific research questions. **Write 200-400 words describing the type of respondent and why this type of respondent is appropriate given your research area and questions.**
2. Think about what kinds of interview questions you would ask the type of respondent you've chosen to understand more about the research



- question you've chosen. **Write 200-400 words explaining how you went from research questions to preliminary interview protocol.**
3. Write a brief preliminary interview protocol consisting of no more than 3-5 questions. **List the questions in your preliminary interview protocol.**
 4. Find two respondents who fit your target respondent profile and get them to agree to be interviewed. Make sure that you can schedule the interviews in time for you to complete Assignment 4.

Assignment 3B should have three parts:

1. 200-400 words describing the type of respondent and why this type of respondent is appropriate given your research area and questions.
2. 200-400 words explaining how you went from research question to interview protocol,
3. The 3-5 questions in your preliminary interview protocol.

Come to class ready to present your findings and to discuss the experience of developing, conducting, and analysing your interviews.

Assignments 3A and 3B are both due by upload as separate documents to the course Dropbox folder by 1200 CET on the day of Session 1.

SESSION 4: INTERVIEWING PEOPLE AND UNDERSTANDING THE INTERVIEW

This session covers the experience of interviewing respondents and analysing their responses.

Readings:

1. Weiss, R. 1994. *Learning from Strangers*. New York: Free Press. PDF contains 1-120; read 61-82, other pages optional but recommended.
2. Patton, M. Q. 2002. Chapter 7 "Qualitative interviewing," in *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage. p339-427.

Assignment 4:

1. Conduct a 30-45-minute semi-structured interview with your first respondent. Do not exceed the time limit. You may record audio or you may choose to write notes from the interview in whatever format you choose.
2. Revise your interview protocol if you deem it necessary. **Write 200-400 words explaining what you learned about your protocol from doing the first interview and how you chose to change the protocol.**
3. Conduct a 30-45-minute semi-structured interview with your second respondent. Do not exceed the time limit. You may record audio or you may choose to write notes from the interview in whatever format you choose.
4. If you have recorded audio, you may transcribe the audio. Analyse your notes and transcriptions (if you have chosen to transcribe) from the two interviews.
5. **Write 800-1500 words presenting your findings from the pair of interviews, being sure to include primary data (i.e., quotes from respondents) in your description.**



Assignment 4 should have two parts:

1. 200-400 words explaining what you learned about your protocol from doing the first interview and how you chose to change the protocol.
2. 800-1500 words presenting your findings from the pair of interviews, being sure to include primary data (i.e., quotes from respondents) in your description.

Assignment 4 is due by upload to the course Dropbox folder by 1200 CET on the day of Session 1.

SESSION 5: SYNTHESIZING IDEAS AND DATA FOR INSIGHT

This session covers synthesizing ideas and data from observation and interviews to develop provisional insights.

Readings:

1. Graebner M. E., Martin J. A. and Roundy, P. T. 2012 Qualitative data: Cooking without a recipe, *Strategic Organization*, 10(3)
2. van Maanen, J. 1979. The fact of fiction in organizational ethnography, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 24(4): 539-550.

Assignment 5:

1. Reread Assignments 1-4 and your notes from having each assignment discussed in Sessions 1-4. It is fine (and even to be expected) that you have changed your mind about many things you wrote in your previous assignments.
2. Write a synthetic memorandum of 1800-2400 words covering:
 - a. Your revised understanding of your research area
 - b. Your revised understanding of your research questions
 - c. The field setting for your observations and interviews
 - d. Your understanding of any emerging answers to your research questions
 - e. Any theory that may be emerging from analysing your observation and interview data

Come to class ready to present your synthetic memorandum and to discuss your reflections on the process of thinking about and doing observational and interview-based research.

Assignment 5 is due by upload to the course Dropbox folder by 1200 CET on the day of Session 5.

Teaching methods/Online tools and software:

This course requires students to read assigned material, engage with it critically, and be ready to discuss it in class in the context of the written work they and their fellow course participants produce. Students will have to complete homework (comprising light data collection, data analysis, and writing) and reading in advance of each course meeting.

Course materials/List of readings:

Listed for each session.

**Prerequisites:**

No prior knowledge or experience with observation or interviewing is required.

Course credit /Examination Methods:

The course grade has 2 components:

1. Participation during course meetings: 25%.
2. Five short individual assignments: 75% (15% each). Five individual assignments as outlined in the syllabus above, each informed by the course readings and requiring primary data collection, data analysis, and writing.

Biographical note:

[Vaughn Tan](#) (PhD, Harvard) is Assistant Professor of Strategy and Entrepreneurship at University College London (on leave 2022). For over a decade, he has used observation and interview methods to study and theorize about how teams and organizations can be designed to innovate better and flourish in uncertain situations. Vaughn is currently the executive director of the Data Protection Foundation and a board member at Rethink Food. Previously, Vaughn worked at Google in California. His first book is *The Uncertainty Mindset* (Columbia Univ. Press, 2021).