GEOGRAPHY 371: Research Strategies in Human Geography

Winter 2010

The objectives of this course are to enable you to conduct original research, to evaluate critically the research designs of others, and to develop your appreciation of how knowledge is acquired. You will come to recognize the diversity of methods in geography, the appropriateness of different methods for different research questions and the standards by which each method should be evaluated.

The major project of the course requires that you formulate, in collaboration with 4-6 other students, an original research question, specify the appropriate methods to explore that question, carry out a focused research project, analyse the evidence assembled and then report on your project to class. The project involves library research and the creative assimilation of existing literature as part of the process of specifying a research problem. We lay considerable emphasis on the communication of your ideas. As one aspect of this, you are required to write and rewrite your work throughout the term in order to clarify your thinking and improve your writing skills. You are required to participate in a group presentation of your findings at the end of term.

COURSE TOPICS

1. Why Study Methodology?
2. Literature Review and Defining a Research Problem
3. Research Ethics
4. Survey Research
5. Semi-Structured Interviews, Focus Groups and Other Story-telling Strategies
6. Secondary Data
7. Ethnography
8. Evaluation and Participatory Research

READINGS

There is no required textbook. Required readings are outlined in bold on accompanying reading lists. Those not available electronically are available in the GIC and for purchase at Copiesmart in the University Village. There are several methodology textbooks (e.g. Robin Flowerdew and David Martin’s Methods in Human Geography 2dn Edn. Essex, Pearson Education, 2005) on reserve in the GIC under this course listing and it will be useful to consult them when tackling specific methodological dilemmas that come up as you do your group project.

COURSE WEBSITE

The course website is on the departmental website: http://www.geog.ubc.ca/courses/geog371/

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

A. Reading Assignments should be done in time so that class time will be useful. The first reading assignment is for the next class, January 7th.

B. Group Research Project
A major endeavor during the semester will be developing a research proposal, doing the research and presenting the results of your research to the rest of the class. You will work in the same group of 5-7 students for the entire term. Groups will be assembled amongst students scheduled for the same discussion groups. Each member of the group is expected to contribute equally to the research project. You will have to move very quickly to identify a research question and methodology, in order to get our paperwork into the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board by January 28 (at the latest). (It can take about a month for review.) In collaboration with your group members, you will select a topic within the first week of the
semester and then stick with it for the rest of the term, developing a research question, a methodology to answer it, preparing the application for ethical review, carrying out the research, writing a report and presenting it to class. My hope is that different groups will select different methodologies and that we can work directly on your projects as these methodologies arise in class. That is, when we discuss questionnaire construction, we can work on some of the groups’ questionnaires rather than think about questionnaire construction in the abstract or as a hypothetical case. When we talk about interviews, we can pretest interview schedules and train the interviewers who have chosen this methodology. Those doing archival research or content analysis can guide us through their process. I want the whole class – projects and ‘lectures’ to feel as real as possible – after all, you are doing a real research project.

Wiki or Google Doc: Group work is both rewarding and challenging. To help the process run smoothly, I am asking you to use some sort of document sharing application, either google doc or wiki (http://wiki.ubc.ca). This will allow all individuals in the group to work on and edit the research proposal and project report, and will help to keep everyone in the group up to date with any revisions made to the jointly prepared text.

Community-Partnered Research:

There is an opportunity for a maximum of three groups to work on a community-partnered research project. One involves working with Pivot Legal Society documenting the effects of the Olympics on the mobility of marginalized people in downtown Vancouver and/or the impact on homeless individuals and families in the downtown area. Another involves working with Crabtree Corner Family Resource Centre in the Downtown Eastside assessing the issues of women and families using this resource centre. A group from this class worked with this organization last year on food security issues. A third possibility involves working with Kitsilano Neighbourhood House on food security issues on Vancouver’s West side. They want to document what services are available, what the needs of the community are, and what motivates people to make the food choices that they make.

Working on a community-partnered project is not for everyone and course grades are not tied to working on this kind of project; it will require an extra level of commitment, including meeting with community partners off campus outside of class time to devise a research question of mutual interest, and reporting back to the community organization outside of class time about your research results and their practical implications. At the same time, along with the community benefits, the personal benefits are substantial. You will know that your research was more than a pedagogical exercise (important in itself of course) and will be read and used by a community organization in ways that potentially matter. You can put this collaboration on your resume. Since the start-up time is very compressed in this class, you will need to identify your interest in this option almost immediately - literally.

There is a further challenge to participating in one of these projects, a matter of simple scheduling. Caleb Johnston will be guiding the group or groups working with Pivot Legal and so you must be able to attend the 2 pm discussion group. A meeting has been set up at Pivot Legal for Thursday 7 (yes, in two days) at 12:30 and at least 2 group members of the group, one of whom is willing to become the liaison with Pivot Legal, must be able to attend to get a sense of the research priorities of this organization. For Crabtree Corner, a meeting has been set up for Tuesday January 12 at 12 noon. For Kitsilano Neighbourhood House, an initial meeting has been scheduled for Tuesday 12 at 2 pm.

Class held at Koerner Library: We will meet at Koerner Libray in room 217 on January 14th to do a lab with the Geography Research Librarian on researching your topics.

Schedule for Written Assignments Associated with Group Research Project: Written assignments associated with the research project will be due on the following dates:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignments</th>
<th>Dates for submission</th>
<th>Grade Allocation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief statement of topic</td>
<td>January 12</td>
<td>This is for discussion purposes only. (1% for topic statement.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diary of library search</td>
<td>January 19</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalised Certificate of Completion</td>
<td>January 19</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submit materials for Ethical Review</td>
<td>January 26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Proposal</td>
<td>February 4</td>
<td>10% (Group grade)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revised proposal</td>
<td>March 4</td>
<td>10% (Group grade)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Checking in with TA once a week from</td>
<td>March 2 to March 23</td>
<td>4% (Group grade)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(with evidence of progress)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class presentation</td>
<td>April 1, 6, 8</td>
<td>10% (Group grade)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final report</td>
<td>April 15</td>
<td>20% (Group grade)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual reflection on project</td>
<td>April 22</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidential Peer Review Form</td>
<td>April 22</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Confidential Peer Review:** Since 54% of the grade is shared by all members of the group, the confidential peer review of members of your group will assist me in differentiating individual contributions, when relevant. I will ask you to rate each member of your group on a variety of factors. If particular students are identified by multiple group members as not pulling their weight I will adjust the grade down as much as two full grades. Alternatively, if a particular member of the group is assessed by multiple group members as making an exceptional contribution to the group, I will adjust the grade upwards as much as a full grade.

**Class Participation:** As well as the written assignments there is the expectation that your group will participate in class at least once, bringing forth some of your methodological issues for class work.

C. **T.A. led Discussion Groups**

You will meet with your T.A. and other group members in discussion groups for the first four weeks of term, starting January 12. The discussion groups are meant to get you up and running with your research proposal. After February 2nd and until March 2nd (whilst your submission to the Ethical Board is likely under review), formal discussion groups will not be held (although your T.A. will still be available during scheduled discussion times), and we will simply meet in class time. After March 2nd, I would like at least one member of each group to check in with your TA once a week each Tuesday, either by attending your scheduled discussion time (most groups did this last year and found it very useful) or – if it more important to be spending time in the field – by sending in a one page ‘report from the field’ on the activities of your group.

The following activities are planned for four scheduled discussion groups during January:

**Discussion Group 1: January 12**
You are asked to come with two ideas of possible topics written on a piece of paper (no more than a paragraph). The goal of the lab/discussion is to solidify group membership and for each group to emerge with a topic that can be developed into a research question that will generate an empirical research project.

**You receive 1 % for bringing the topic statement but it will not be graded for content.**

**Discussion Group 2: January 19**

Come to this discussion ready to talk with your group about the library research you have done. You are expected to come ready to summarise and discuss 2 articles or books that you think are relevant to your topic. Having read more widely in the area, what research questions are emerging and how do they connect to the existing literature?

**Discussion Group 3: January 26**

Today you will work on preparing your submission to the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board. We will likely continue this activity during class time as everything has to be submitted this day.

**Discussion Group 4: February 2**

You will finalise your draft research proposal, to be handed in on Thursday of this week.

**D. Exam**

There is a midterm exam on March 11th worth 20% of the course grade.

**GRADES**

Final grades will be computed as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In class midterm exam</th>
<th>20%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group Project:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic statement</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library search diary</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate of Completion</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance at first 4 discussion groups</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draft research proposal</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revised research proposal</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Checking in with TA in March with concrete reports of progress</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final report on research project</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Presentation</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection on research process and project</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidential Peer Review</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Please Note:** Although many of the assignments tied to the research project that are done throughout the term are time consuming, they may feel that they are worth little when actually marked -- relative to the effort involved. This is intentional, reflecting the fact that they are work in progress which you will improve through revision throughout the term. Individual assignments build into the final report and the weight given to the final report reflects our expectation (and confidence) that the final version will look very different from the first.

**Policy on Late Papers/Assignments:** Unless you have made arrangements with me (and provided appropriate medical documentation), all papers/assignments will be docked 1% for every day late.

**OFFICE HOURS**
My office is Room 140D. My telephone number is 822-5875. Email: gpratt@geog.ubc.ca. My office hours are Tuesday 10:30-12 and Thursday 1-3. If these hours are not convenient for you we can arrange to meet at another time. Please note that I will not be available for office hours on January 7 and 12 and week of March 2nd. I will also be away April 13-16.

TEACHING ASSISTANTS

Your group will work closely with one teaching assistant for the group research project. There are two teaching assistants in the course; the teaching assistant with whom you will work depends on the time and location of your discussion group.

Tuesday 10 am and 11am and 12 pm: Geog 242 Michael Tohmason mjthomason@googlemail.com
Tuesday 2 pm: Geog 215 Caleb Johnston caleb.f.johnston@gmail.com

Your teaching assistants do not have office hours beyond the scheduled discussion group times but you can email them to arrange a meeting if this is necessary.

READING LIST AND TOPICS

*******REQUIRED READINGS IN BOLD*******

1. WHY STUDY METHODOLOGY?

There are many different views on what social science is and should be, on what empirical research is meant to accomplish, and how it should be carried out. One of the issues that we will consider is whether common principles span the diversity of methods that we will consider. The paper by Bourgois offers a short, vivid, concrete example of ethnographic research and allows us to think through how this type of qualitative research nonetheless retains some of the fundamental characteristics of the scientific method. Please read the Bourgois paper for class on January 7th. Andrea Nightingale demonstrates that mixing different methods is one way of working through the limits of any one methodology, a point that we will return to throughout the term.


Andrea Nightingale, 2003, A Feminist in the Forest: Situated knowledges and mixing methods in natural resource management. ACME 2:1, 77-90. (available online)

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND DEFINING A RESEARCH PROBLEM

These readings offer tips on finding a topic, defining a research question, doing a library search, developing an argument, and writing a literature review.

Flowerdew and Martin, Methods in Human Geography, chapters 3, 4, 17. [This reading is not in your course reading package but the book is on reserve in the GIC.]

Kristin Luker, 2008 Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences: Research in an age of info-glut. Harvard University Press, 76-98 (“Reviewing the Literature”). [The previous chapter that focuses on defining a research question is also very useful. The book is on reserve in the GiC.]

3 ETHICS


Caitlin Cahill 2007 Repositioning Ethical Commitments: Participatory Action Research as Relational Praxis of Social Change. ACME 6:3, 360-373. (Available online) The reading very helpfully expands the terms for thinking about the ethics of research.

4. SURVEY RESEARCH


5. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS, FOCUS GROUPS AND OTHER STORY-TELLING STRATEGIES


6. SECONDARY DATA AND OTHER DOCUMENTARY SOURCES


Alternative suggested readings:
Stuart Aitken “Textual analysis: reading culture and context” in Robin Flowerdew and David Martin, Methods in Human Geography, 233-249.

Stuart Aitken and James Craine “Visual methodologies: what you see is not always what you get” in Robin Flowerdew and David Martin, Methods in Human Geography, 250-269.

7. ETHNOGRAPHY

Eric Laurier 2003 Participant Observation in Key Methods in Geography Edited by Nicholas Clifford and Gill Valentine, Sage: London, pp.133-159


8. EVALUATION/PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH


WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS TIED TO PROJECT

1. Bring to Discussion Group on January 12 a brief statement of topics

Develop an initial topic statement. What are two topics that you find interesting? Why are they interesting and important? Your topics and justification for focusing on them should be clear and concise, certainly no more than one page in length. Would this topic actually be practical if you were to do the research? What are the ethical implications of studying this topic?

2. Diary of Library Search – Due January 19

You are required to include three things in this diary and come prepared to do a fourth in class time. First, draw yourself a ‘daisy’ as explained in the Luker reading. Put all of the items you think your study covers as petals on a daisy, and then see where there are overlaps. Second, bring a record of 5 sources that you have found, recording databases and search terms used. Third, evaluate two of these references using the criteria outlined by Healey (and discussed in class), and fourth, be prepared to describe the key points that you were able to extract from these two references in just 5 minutes.

3. Draft Research Proposal – Due February 4

a) Define a research problem.

b) Review the pertinent literature in roughly 1500 words. The main idea of a literature review is to show how your research fits into what has been done before and why your study needs to be done.

A good review:

i) synthesizes and evaluates the previous literature
ii) delineates the known from the unknown
iii) develops a line of argument
iv) lays the groundwork for the study or analysis to come

Consider the following:

You need to contextualise the research question in both ‘the real world’ and the scholarly literature. What is the present state of knowledge in this general area (i.e., the area pertaining to your proposed study)? What have previous studies found? Have earlier studies fallen short? Where does your study fit in? Where (how) does your study fill a gap in the literature or perform research that previously has not been done?

c) Include a brief (500 word) statement of chosen methods (recognizing that you have not yet completed the course!) The description of proposed methodology will vary, depending on your research question and chosen methods. The purpose of the description is to identify methods, data sources, variables of interest and methods for measuring and/or interpreting them, and sampling strategies.

4. Due March 4th: Revised Literature Review and Problem Statement

Most of you will need to revise your literature review substantially in order to refine your research problem and its relationship to the existing literature. You will undoubtedly need to consult more library sources to
do this, and to clarify and refine your research question. (2500 word limit and minimum of 15 library sources.)

5. April 15: Final Report Due. See details below.

6. April 22: Reflection

Recognising that you defined your methods before you took this course, and hoping that you have learnt a great deal through the course and by actually doing the project, I would like you to reflect on what you learnt, and how, in an ideal world unconstrained by a looming ethical review deadline, you would reframe your question and rethink your methodology. 2000 word limit.

FINAL REPORTS

The following guidelines may prove helpful to you in structuring your final report. There are two chapters in Robin Flowerdew and David Martin’s *Methods in Human Geography* (chapters 17 and 18, on hold in the GIC) on designing and writing a research report.

I. TITLE PAGE

The report should have an interesting title: "Final Report for Geography 371" is not an interesting title.

II. ABSTRACT (500 word limit)

The abstract should summarize the research problem, methods used, and major findings. See page 293-4 of Flowerdew and Martin’s book for tips on writing an abstract.

Please note: Sections III – V need not be separate sections under separate subheadings (i.e., one section can flow into the other within the text) but you need to include them all so it may be helpful to recognize each as a separate component.

III. INTRODUCTION (@ 300 words)

The first paragraph or two should acquaint the reader with the general area of inquiry. What is the general context of the proposed research?

IV. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM (@300 words)

What is the problem you are studying and why is it important to study it? What are the objectives of the proposed research?

V. BACKGROUND/LITERATURE REVIEW (@1800 words)

The main idea in this section is to show how your research fits in to what's been done before and why your study needs to be done. A good literature review:

i) delineates the known from the unknown
ii) develops a line of argument; and
iii) lays the groundwork for the study or analysis to come

Consider the following:
What is the present state of knowledge in this general area (i.e., the area pertaining to your proposed research)? What have previous studies found? Where have earlier studies fallen short? Where does your study fit in? Where (how) does your study fill a gap in the literature or perform a necessary bit of research that has previously not been done?

VI. METHODOLOGY/STUDY DESIGN (1200 word limit)

Why did you choose these methods rather than others? Why are you using a quantitative or qualitative approach, or some mixture of each? What is the study area? What is the unit of observation? And why have you chosen this particular site and unit of observation? What sampling strategy did you use? If relevant, what was the response rate? What are the variables or concepts under investigation and how were they measured or studied empirically? What data was collected or used and why is it appropriate for the problem at hand? What are the strengths and limitations of the data? If you collected your own data, how did you go about doing this? For example, if you have done a survey, give details about how you administered it, what variables you have included in the questionnaire, and describe the decisions that you made when you designed your questionnaire concerning question format and order, etc. Or if you have done an ethnography, describe the process of ‘getting in’, the types of fieldnotes that you took, and challenges, including ethical dilemmas and concerns about validity.

VII. ANALYSIS (1200 word limit)

The nature of the analysis will depend on your data. If you are doing a quantitative analysis you are likely developing some descriptive statistics, possibly cross-tabulating one variable against another. (Chapter 12 in Robin Flowerdew and David Martin’s Methods in Human Geography offers some guidance.) If you are doing a qualitative analysis, Mike Crang’s chapter (13) in the same book offers some tips, as does Meghan Cope’s chapter (cited in reading list). You will need to describe how you developed codes and what themes emerged through analysis.

VIII. SIGNIFICANCE OF PROPOSED RESEARCH (500 word limit)

Consider the significance of the results of your research, both practically and in relation to the scholarly literature. For groups partnering with a community group, this should be written in a way that is useful to this group.

IX. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS (@500 words)

For those partnering with a community group, offer some useful direction for future collaborations with other UBC students in Geography or other departments. What still needs to be done or what new questions have arisen through your research?

IX. LITERATURE CITED (15 sources would be a minimum)

List items alphabetically. Consult recent issues of the Annals of the AAG for guidance on format. I do not care which format you use. I simply ask that you use one style consistently.

X. APPENDICES (WHERE APPROPRIATE)

Here you should include a copy of your questionnaire, field notes, interview schedule, coding sheets or other relevant information about data collection and analysis.
Assessment Criteria for Research Reports

A- to A+ Exemplary

Coursework in this category will demonstrate the ability to infer relevant ideas, evidence, and information from library research sources, and integrate the material with the writers’ own ideas, to arrive at an original and persuasive research problem and analysis. It will demonstrate the ability to understand and interpret ideas, evidence, and information. It will demonstrate an appreciation of the complexities and ambiguities of the problem, show the capacity for creative thinking and curiosity, and is able to reflect on the strength and weaknesses of approaches to the problem, including their own. The project will demonstrate a novel and creative approach to addressing the research problem. It will also demonstrate that the proposed methods have been carried out in a thorough way and that the assembled data have been analysed with care. All components of the assignment will be in place and done in an exemplary manner. All coursework in this range will be clearly written throughout with a strong introduction, literature review, methodology, analysis, and assessment of research implications. The paragraphs will be well-ordered with topic sentences and smooth transitions. The tone will be persuasive. Written work in this category should be free of typos, spelling mistakes, and grammatical errors. Coursework at the lower end of the range will have some minor errors or be slightly less developed than that at the top of the range. All work in the A- to A+ range will demonstrate an accurate use of citation formats and have an exemplary bibliography that reflects the appropriate depth, range, and complexity of research for the topic.

B- to B+ Competent

Coursework in this category will demonstrate a good comprehension of the information, ideas, and evidence in the library research sources. Work in this category will make a less obvious original contribution to the literature, in the way that the problem is defined, and the research undertaken. Work at the lower end of this range show evidence of some difficulty discerning what is the most relevant information, ideas, and evidence from research sources, and/or have some difficulty understanding or interpreting the research sources, and/or have overlooked some crucial evidence or use evidence inconsistently, and/or exhibit a lack of clarity in the writing, and/or have a poorly-conceived thesis and a weak introduction, and/or lack fully developed methodology, data collection or analysis so that the conclusions remain under-developed. This category is also appropriate for work that demonstrates an exemplary capacity for the critical, creative, and strategic integration of ideas to arrive at a solution typical of the A- to A+ category, but is so full of sentence-level errors that the writing is not clear or persuasive. Work in this range will use citation formats accurately and have a competent bibliography that meets the basic needs of the research.

D to C+ Developing

Coursework in this category demonstrates an emerging ability to understand ideas, information, and evidence in the research sources, to define a problem and execute empirical research. Work in this range relies heavily on quoting, paraphrasing, and describing the work of other scholars without taking a clear position or point of view. The methodology, data collection, and data analysis need considerable development.