SDS 237: Data Ethnography

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2024-09-03

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1 Syllabus

Figure 1: Course logo designed by Zoe Scheffler, Fall '21

Without rich documentation, quantitative data can strip away critical context needed to interpret values responsibly. This course introduces students to the theory and practice of data ethnography, demonstrating how qualitative data collection and analysis can be brought to bear on the study of data settings and artifacts. Through experiential exercises, students will learn techniques in field-note writing, participant observation, in-depth interviewing, documentary analysis, and archival research and how they may be used to contextualize the cultural underpinnings of datasets. Students will learn how to visualize datasets in ways that foreground their socio-political provenance in R. Students will also learn how ethnographic methods can be leveraged to improve data documentation and communication. The course

will introduce debates regarding the politics of techno-scientific fieldwork. Upon completion of this course, you should be able to:

1. Recognize, interpret, and communicate the cultural underpinnings of data resources, infrastructures, and practices
2. Define and engage principal methods of ethnography and communicate when and how they may be used in the study of data
3. Strategically apply relevant ethnographic methods to the study of a data setting or artifact
4. Produce data documentation and visualizations that account for the cultural contexts of data production, categorization, measurement, and use

Classes will be held on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 2:45 PM to 4:00 PM.

1.1 Course Instructor

Figure 2: Lindsay Poirier, she/her/hers.

I am a cultural anthropologist that studies how civic data gets produced, how communities think about and interface with data, and how data infrastructure can be designed more equitably. My Ph.D. is in an interdisciplinary discipline called Science and Technology Studies - a field that studies the intricate ways science, technology, culture, and politics all co-constitute each other. I work on a number of collaborative research projects that leverage public data to deepen understanding of social and environmental inequities in the US, while also qualitatively studying the politics behind data gaps and inconsistencies. As an instructor, I prioritize active learning and often structure courses as flipped classrooms. You can expect in-class time to predominantly involve group activities and live problem-solving exercises.

1.1.1 Getting in Touch

1.1.1.1 Slack

I can best support students in this course when I can readily keep tabs on our course-related communication. Because of this, I ask that you please don't email me regarding course-related questions or issues. The best way to get in touch with me is via our course Slack. If you have course-related questions, I encourage you to ask them in the `#sds-237-questions` channel. When discretion is needed, feel free to DM. Please reserve more formal concerns like grades or accommodation requests for an in-person (or in-person virtual) conversation.

During the week, I will try my best to answer all Slack messages within 24 hours of receiving them. Please note that to maintain my own work-life balance, I don't answer Slack messages late in the evenings or on the weekends. It's important that you plan when you start your assignments accordingly.

1.1.1.2 Meeting with Me

Meeting with me outside of class is a great opportunity for us to chat about what you're learning in the course, clarify expectations on assignments, and review work in progress. I also love when students drop in to office hours to request book recommendations, discuss career or research paths, or just to say hi!

There are two ways to meet with me. If you would like to have a one-on-one private conversation, I ask that you schedule an appointment with me via the booking form on Moodle. For support on class topics, you may drop-in during my regularly scheduled office hours.

- Tuesday, 1:30PM-2:30PM, McConnell 214
- Thursday, 4:15-5:15PM, McConnell 214

1.2 Course Texts

I will make all course readings available on Perusall, which can be accessed through our course Moodle page.

1.3 Assessment

This course will be graded via a grading contract.

> 💡 Jacobson Center
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> Smith's Jacobson Center asserts that *all* students can improve their communication and learning skills. I encourage all students to take advantage of their writing support services, workshops, and tutors.

1.4 Policies

1.4.1 Preparation

This is a 4-credit course with 3 hours per week of in-classroom instructions. Smith expects students to devote 9 out-of-class hours per week to 4-credit classes. I have designed the course assignments and selected the course readings with this target in mind.

1.4.2 Attendance

Because this course aims to hone certain critical thinking skills, much of the learning happens in class, in collaboration with peers. Attendance in class is both important for your own learning, and for your peers' learning, as we will spend a good chunk of time in class engaging in group activities and discussions.

Attendance will be taken each class period. That said, we all have reasons we can't be available from time-to-time. You may miss **three classes with no penalty**. You do not need to inform me that you will be absent in these cases, but you should let your group members know. After the third unexcused absence, your grade may drop by a modifier for each class missed. I understand that you may need to be absent beyond these three sessions. Additional absences may be excused due to family/personal difficulties, sickness, or school or career-related activities; however, I will require some form of documentation for these absences. Please speak with your class dean or the Accessibility Resource Center so that we can get documentation of your need.

I also ask that you make every effort to arrive to class on time. This is a large course, and when students arrive late, it can be distracting for me as the instructor, and it can be distracting to other students in the course. It also makes it difficult for me to plan group activities. Students arriving more than 10 minutes late for class without having informed me ahead of time will be marked as absent.

If you must miss a class entirely, you should contact a peer to discuss what was missed. Please note that the SDS Program has adopted a shared policy regarding in-person attendance:

In keeping with Smith's core identity and mission as an in-person, residential college, SDS affirms College policy (as per the Provost and Dean of the College) that students will attend class in person. SDS courses will not provide options for remote attendance. Students who have been determined to require a remote attendance accommodation by the Accessibility Resource Center will be the only exceptions to this policy. As with any other kind of ADA accommodations, please notify your instructor during the first week of classes to discuss how we can meet your accommodations.

1.4.3 Extensions

This course aims to support you in learning to become more perceptive to data environments surrounding you. Because of this I've deliberately spread course assignments out over the semester in order to help you gain practice in consistently paying attention to these environments. This critical mode of thinking can't be cultivated effectively if the work is being crammed into later parts of the semester. Further, because this course emphasizes student growth over achievement, I also want to ensure that I can provide feedback on your writing in time for you to incorporate it into future assignments.

There is a 24-hour grace period on all written assignments. There will be no penalties for submitting the written assignment within this 24-hour period, and you do not need to inform me that you intend to take the extra time. You can also request up to a 72-hour extension on any written assignment, as long *as you make that request at least 48 hours before the original assignment due date.* You can request an extension by filling out the Extension Request form on Moodle, and I will confirm your extension on Slack. Beyond this, late assignments will not be accepted.

Note that this policy does not apply to reading assignments/Perusall annotations. *Reading assignments/Perusall annotations need to be completed by the due date for credit.*

1.4.4 Academic Honesty

Smith College expects all students to be honest and committed to the principles of academic and intellectual integrity in their preparation and submission of course work and examinations. Students and faculty at Smith are part of an academic community defined by its commitment to scholarship, which depends on scrupulous and attentive acknowledgement of all sources of information, and honest and respectful use of college resources. Any cases of dishonesty or plagiarism will be reported to the Academic Honor Board. Examples of dishonesty or plagiarism include:

- Submitting work completed by another student as your own.
- Copying and pasting words from sources without quoting and citing the author.

- Paraphrasing material from another source without citing the author.
- Failing to cite your sources correctly.
- Falsifying or misrepresenting information in submitted work.
- Paying another student or service to complete assignments for you.
- Submitting work generated by artificially intelligent tools such as chatGPT

1.4.5 Generative AI

The use of generative artificial intelligence tools is becoming increasingly ubiquitous in a number of domains of work. Despite the urge to push forward with this innovative technology, there are both pedagogical and social reasons that I do not allow students to use generative AI in the context of this course.

This course aims to facilitate the development of your ability to think critically and express your ideas with care. The depth of your learning in this course cannot be assessed if Generative AI is aiding or doing this work for you. This course also encourages reflexivity - i.e. I will ask you often throughout the semester to reflect on and communicate your personal standpoint and how it impacts the way you write about cultural phenomenon. Since many generative AI algorithms act as "black boxes" (i.e. we don't fully know what data they were trained on and how they operate internally) it's not possible to be fully account for the standpoint from which generative AI text was generated.

Further, there are countless unresolved social concerns that stem from the use of generative AI - from the loss of cultural heritage, to the limiting of human aspirations and viewpoints, to the lack of formal mechanisms for regulating its potential social harms. Generative AI models often undermine scholarly values of credit by training on data harvested from across the internet that content creators have not provided express permission to use for these purposes. As an example, several academic journal articles that I have written were recently sold to Microsoft AI; I did not have an opportunity to opt out of this, and I will not receive any compensation for my contributions. Copyright laws have not been able to keep pace with the technology. This course will teach you how to interrogate how these kinds of social harms can emerge from data-based systems and imagine opportunities for mitigating them; the course itself suggests taking a precautionary approach in the absence of regulation and other safeguards.

Accordingly, any use of generative artificial intelligence in this course will be considered a case of academic dishonesty/plagiarism and will be reported to the Academic Honor Board.

1.5 Community

1.5.1 Code of Conduct

As the instructor for this course, I am committed to making participation in this course a harassment-free experience for everyone, regardless of level of experience, gender, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, disability, personal appearance, body size, race, ethnicity, age, or religion. Examples of unacceptable behavior by participants in this course include the use of sexual language or imagery, derogatory comments or personal attacks, trolling, public or private harassment, insults, or other unprofessional conduct.

As the instructor I have the right and responsibility to point out and stop behavior that is not aligned to this Code of Conduct. Participants who do not follow the Code of Conduct may be reprimanded for such behavior. Instances of abusive, harassing, or otherwise unacceptable behavior may be reported by contacting the instructor.

All students and the instructor are expected to adhere to this Code of Conduct in all settings for this course: seminars, office hours, and over Slack.

This Code of Conduct is adapted from the Contributor Covenant, version 1.0.0, available here.

1.5.2 Principles of Community

I hope that we can foster a collaborative and caring environment in this classroom: one that celebrates successes, respects individual strengths and weaknesses, demonstrates compassion for each other's struggles, and affirms diverse identities. Here are some ideas that I have for creating this environment in our course:

- Check-in with colleagues before starting collaborative work. "What three words describe how you're feeling?" "Name one challenge and one success from this week." "What are you doing for self-care right now?" Thank each other for sharing where they're at.
- Consider when to step up and when to step back in class discussions, creating space for others to contribute. Listening is just as important to community-building as speaking.
- Acknowledge that there is much we don't know about how our colleagues experience the world. …but don't ask colleagues to speak on behalf of a social group you perceive them to be a part of.
- Cheer on colleagues as they give presentations or try something out for the first time.
- Ask questions often in our `#sds-237-questions` channel. Help each other out by answering questions when you can.
- Mistakes happen. I will certainly make mistakes in class. Admit mistakes, and then move on.

1.5.3 Pronouns

Using the proper pronouns for our students is foundational to a safe, respectful classroom environment that creates a culture of trust. For information on pronouns and usage, please see the Office of Equity and Inclusion link here: Pronouns

1.6 Support

1.6.1 Accommodations

It is my goal for everyone to succeed in this course. If you have personal circumstances that may impact your experience of our classroom, I encourage you to contact Accessibility Resource Center in College Hall 104 or at arc@smith.edu. The Center will generate a letter that indicates to me what kind of support you need and how I can make your classroom experience more accommodating. Once you have this letter, you are welcome to visit my office hours or email me to discuss ideas about how we can tailor the course accordingly. While you can request accommodations at any time, the sooner we start this conversation, the better. If you have concerns about the course that are not addressed through ARC, please contact me. At no point will I ask you to divulge details about your personal circumstances to me.

1.6.2 Student Well-being

College life is stressful, and life outside of college can be overwhelming. It is my position that attending to your physical and mental health and well-being should be a top priority. I will remind you of this often throughout the semester. I encourage you to schedule a time to talk with me if you are struggling with this course. If you, or anyone you know, is experiencing distress, there are numerous campus resources that can provide support via the Schacht Center. I can point you to these resources at any time throughout the semester.

1.6.3 Trigger Warnings

A trigger is a topic or image that can precipitate an intense emotional response. When common triggering topics are to be covered in this course, I will do my best to provide a trigger warning in advance of the discussion. However, I can't always anticipate triggers. With this in mind I've set up an anonymous form, available on Moodle, where you can indicate topics for which you would like me to provide a warning.

1.7 Infrastructure

1.7.1 Moodle

Grades, forms, and handouts will be available on the course Moodle.

1.7.2 Perusall

All course readings and recorded lectures will be available on Perusall. You can access Perusall via our course Moodle page.

1.7.3 Google Drive

This semester, you will submit all of your assignments in a Google Drive folder that you will create on the first day of class. You can write your assignments in Google Docs, or you can work on your own computer and upload files to Google Drive. I just need to be able to open the files on my computer.

1.7.4 Slack

Outside of class almost all of our communication will happen via Slack. You can use the following channels

- `#general`: Course announcements (only I can post)
- `#sds-237-discussions`: Share news articles and relevant opportunities
- `#sds-237-questions`: Ask and answer questions about our course
- `#sds-237-class-notes`: Find notes that a designated student took for our class on a given day
- You can also create private Slack channels with your project group members.

2 Grading Contract

Grading contracts have been theorized and implemented in the research of Dr. Peter Elbow and Dr. Asao Inoue. This grading contract is adapted from their work, along with the contracts of Dr. Kate Navickas and Dr. Kati Ahern.

This course will be using a grading contract. This means that the grade you ultimately receive for this course is primarily based on the labor that you perform rather than a subjective evaluation of the quality of your work and writing in relation to your colleagues. Your grade will be determined by the extent of your engagement in class, your timely completion of

assignments, and how you support the course community. You will still attend to and work to improve the quality of your writing and thinking in this course. You will receive extensive feedback on all of your submissions (from me and from your colleagues), and you will have opportunities to revise. However, you will not receive points or an A, B, C, D, etc. on assignments.

I've experimented with a few alternative grading systems, and I'm particularly excited to continue engaging this system this semester as I believe it aligns with my overarching goals for the course. In this course I am less concerned with your ability to come to a specific answer, to master certain procedures, or to produce standardized deliverables. I'm more concerned with the extent to which this course enables you become more perceptive to data environments, to deepen your critical thinking about data's cultural meanings, to experiment with your thinking and writing, and to grapple with ethical dilemmas. There's always room for strengthening these thinking modes further; in fact, every time I teach this course, I find that my own ability to think critically about data deepens through classroom discussions and my reading of student work.

There are many benefits to contract grading. Here are there reasons why I've opted for a grading contract in this course:

- I want you to feel as though you can experiment with your writing in this course. Rather than focusing on what you think I want out of your assignments or "writing to the rubric," grading contracts empower you to take more risks.
- Grading contracts value the time and effort you put into the course and reward students who invest extra time in their learning.
- Grading contracts make it easier for you to anticipate the grade you will receive and plan for achieving that grade.
- Grading contracts promote equity. With grades based entirely on labor, students aren't penalized for not entering the course with the same experience or background knowledge as their colleagues.

2.1 Grade Breakdown

Each row indicates what labor you need to complete in the course to earn the grade indicated in the first column of that row. Note that to earn a particular grade *all* minimum labor criteria in the corresponding row must be met.

Grade	Journal Entries (out of 5)	Mini-projects	Final Project Check-points	Reading Annota-tions	Community Labor Points	Course Ab-sences/Late Arrivals	Advanced Assign-ments
A	4 or more	2 + 1 substan-tive revision	1 group contract + 1 draft + 1 final project	13 or more	8 or more	<=3	3
B	4 or more	2 + 1 substan-tive revision	1 group contract + 1 draft + 1 final project	13 or more	8 or more	<=6	0
C	3 or more	1 + 1 substan-tive revision	1 group contract + 1 draft + 1 final project	10 or more	6 or more	<=9	0
D	2 or more	1, no revision	1 group contract + 1 draft + 1 final project	7 or more	4 or more	<=12	0
E	1	0	0	7 or fewer	3 or fewer	<=15	0

> 💡 Tip
>
> At the start of the course, I will assign a syllabus quiz. If you receive an 80% or better on that quiz, it can replace one of your reading annotation assignments. If you receive a 100% on that quiz, it can replace two of your reading annotation assignments.

2.1.1 Deadlines

Assignments are due **before class** (2:45PM EST) on the designated due date. If you take the 24-hour grace period for written assignments (note that this is not an option for reading assignments), the assignment is due before (2:45PM EST) on the day following the designated due date. Any granted extensions are similarly due before 2:45PM EST on the date the deadline is extended to.

2.1.2 Earning an A

You'll notice that, in most categories, there's no difference in *the quantity* of labor you need to complete to earn an A vs. a B. Earning a B in this course demonstrates that you have completed enough work to meet the course's learning goals. An A grade in this course indicates that you have exceeded expectations of the course's learning goals. Please note that this does not mean that you need to do **more labor** (i.e. more assignments) to earn A. Instead, you need to consistently demonstrate levels of critical thinking on existing course assignments that surpass the minimum requirements.

To earn an A in this course, you will need to complete 3 course assignments at an *advanced level*. You will select the assignments that you want to complete at this level *from the labor log*, giving you an opportunity to choose where you want to engage deeper. The following chart helps breakdown some of the differences between meeting expectations and exceeding expectations:

Meeting Expectations	Exceeding Expectations
Defining and applying course concepts	Drawing connections between course concepts, critiquing them, or extending them (i.e. offering new ways to think about them)
Citing arguments from a course reading to support interpretation and ethnographic arguments	Engaging more deeply with a course reading - unpacking how its arguments are supported and evaluating its relevance when applied to other ethnographic data
Implementing an ethnographic research method	Defending the selection of a research method and evaluating its strengths/limitations
Writing up research findings to convey an argument	Experimenting with the prose and form of argumentative writing with a clear analytic purpose
Reporting ethnographic findings in writing	Critically situating the standpoints of your research findings throughout the writing
Analyzing how a social force shapes the constitution of data	Analyzing how multiple, at times competing, social forces shape the constitution of data
Clearly communicating the contexts that produced data in a format appropriate for a given audience	Creatively playing with the style and medium of communication in order to better reach and engage an audience

> 💡 Tip
>
> Note that you may complete a reading annotation assignment at an advanced level by signing up to lead a 15-minute classroom discussion of that reading. I will remind you of this option throughout the first few weeks of the course. This is the only option for

> completing reading annotation assignments at an advanced level.

The labor log designates which assignments you may attempt to complete at an advanced level. You will be asked to justify why you consider your work on the assignment as *advanced* in the labor log. Please note that, when justifying why I should consider the work advanced in the labor log, you should clearly explain how the **cognitive effort** on the assignment surpasses minimum expectations. While you may end up writing more or spending more time on these assignments, *exceeding the minimum word count* or *spending x hours on the assignment* **would not** be considered adequate justification for advanced level work. Being able to justify **why** your work is advanced demonstrates to me that you have gained a deep understanding of the course's learning objectives and that you have the ability to communicate what you've learned. While it is ultimately up to you to determine what constitutes advanced level work, I am happy to brainstorm ideas with you in office hours.

Please note that I reserve the right to deny advanced level designations after reviewing your work, and I also reserve the right to deem an assignment as having been completed at an advanced level, even when you haven't designated it as such. If ultimately I deny a designation, you may attempt to earn the advanced level designation again. Note that this is a good reason not to wait until the end of the semester to attempt advanced level work.

Attendance/late arrivals also separate A grades from B grades. Keep in mind that the final grade will be reduced by one grade modifier for each unexcused absence/late arrival beyond the number allowed for your contracted grade. This means that if you completed the work for an A, and you have 4 absences, the final grade will be an A-, and with 5 absences, it would be a B+. I chose to use grade modifiers here so that if you miss just one class beyond the first 3 allotted (i.e. 4 absences), it doesn't drop your grade so drastically from an A to a B.

2.2 Assignments

Descriptions of all written and project assignments are available here. For an assignment to be considered complete, it must meet the minimum criteria outlined in the assignment description. It also must be completed "in good faith" - meaning in a way that demonstrates integrity to the spirit of the assignment.

2.3 FAQ

2.3.1 What kind of feedback will I receive regarding my work?

You will receive extensive and timely feedback on all of your submissions (from me and from your colleagues), and you will have opportunities to revise. I will also provide rubrics for most assignments to indicate how I will evaluate your work. However, you will not receive points or an A, B, C, D, etc. on individual assignments.

2.3.2 There appear to be a significant number of assignments and deadlines in this course. Why is this the case?

I've been very deliberate in pacing your assignments for this course for a number of reasons. Developing the critical thinking skills required of ethnography demands building and consistently practicing observational habits. I want you to leave this class being more mindful of the cultural forces shaping the numbers you see everyday. You are being asked to complete several short reflective writing assignments for this course so that you can start to build those habits. I am aware that this will mean that, sometimes, the writing you produce for this course will not be the very best quality you can produce. Especially for the field note assignments, I have prioritized consistency over depth of reflection because the primary goal there is to encourage you to become more habitually observant. This is also why you have the opportunity to select assignments you want to invest more time on when aiming for an A. If you are struggling with this course's workload, I recommend coming to talk with me in office hours.

2.3.3 How can I best keep track of my labor in this course?

Throughout the semester, you will be asked to keep track of your labor via a log that you will share with me. I will reference this log to calculate certain aspects of your final grade. Instructions for using the labor log will be provided in the second week of the course.

2.3.4 Can I earn +/- grades in this course?

+/- will be assigned to final grades at my discretion in cases where a student's work consistently exceeds the expectations (+) of their contracted grade or is in some way insufficient (-). Students can track their progress towards a grade modifier in feedback that I provide throughout the semester. Your grade may also be reduced by a grade modifier for each missed class beyond the number associated with your contracted grade.

2.3.5 What if I need an extension on an assignment?

There is a 24-hour grace period on all written assignments, except for reading annotations. There will be no penalties for submitting the written assignment within this 24-hour period, and you do not need to inform me that you intend to take the extra time. You can also request up to a 72-hour extension on any written assignment, as long *as you make that request at least 48 hours before the original assignment due date*. You can request an extension by filling out the Extension Request form on Moodle, and I will confirm your extension on Slack. Beyond this, late assignments will not be accepted.

2.3.6 Can I ask for extensions or use the grace period for reading annotations?

Reading assignments/Perusall annotations prepare you to participate in class discussions. For this reason, they need to be completed by the due date for credit. I've provided considerable leeway to miss a reading annotation assignment from time-to-time in order to accommodate flexibility in this regard.

2.3.7 What if I don't know how to complete an assignment at an advanced level?

If you are not sure how to complete assignments at an advanced level, you should plan to come talk with me in office hours. I'm more than happy to help you brainstorm ideas!

2.3.8 An assignment deadline is approaching, and I'm unhappy with the quality of my work. What should I do?

While I always encourage students to strive to submit the best work they can, this course's grading contract, coupled with the course's revision assignments, permits you to submit work that you know you want to continue to improve upon without penalty. Not submitting assignments at all has the potentially to significantly lower your grade in this course, whereas submitting an assignment that could benefit from more revision will not be detrimental to your grade as long as the minimum submission requirements are met.