

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

**COMM 368-20E Spring 2019**

T/Th, 11:30-12:45 COMM 013

**Instructor:** Brett Ommen

**Email:** bommen@luc.edu

**Office Hours:** 9-11, T/Th, Lewis Tower 900

**Course Description:** This course teaches the principles of participant-observation research as a critical practice to produce a 'thick description' of meanings, values, hierarchies of interests, power structures and ideals of a particular cultural group or community. Students will engage with a multitude of interdisciplinary toolsets that allow for communication with both rigor and empathy.

**Course Objectives:**

Throughout the semester, students will:

- 1) Build their skills and understanding for what is involved in ethnography as a method of social inquiry, meaning-making, and storytelling
- 2) Learn best practices for how to conduct ethnographic research and its procedures, deciding on a fieldsite, taking field notes, conducting interviews, examination of data and artifacts, and presenting research results to a public audience.
- 3) Gain a vocabulary for discussing ethics, bias, subjectivity, cultural norms, and notions of power.
- 4) Critically assess their own communication, thinking and writing as means of expression and persuasion.

**Course Readings:**

Boellstorff, T., Nardi, B., Pearce, C., & Taylor, T. L. (2012). *Ethnography and virtual worlds: A handbook of method*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Senft, T. (2008). *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in an Age of Social Networks*. New York: Peter Lang Publications.

**Course Organization:**

This course consists of a 1-hour and 15-minute class twice per week.

**Assignments and Grading:**

Research Project

- 1) Ethnography Review
- 2) Prospectus
- 3) Field Notes
- 4) Research Paper
- 5) Research Presentation

Course Activities

- 6) Reading Reviews
- 7) Participation and Professionalism

\*All assignments must be completed in order to pass the course.

\*All assignments must be submitted on time or marks will be deducted.

**Course Website:** <https://sakai.luc.edu/>

Our Sakai space is where we will post information on COMM 368 online. It will also act as a community space where you can share your own interests and draw the class's attention to items of interest. So, check it often for course updates and other information.

You are expected to ask questions and seek out information needed to fulfill the course requirements as an active learner. Additionally, seeking out technical skills to solve new media problems is a key element in this class (and a transferable skillset beyond our classroom). Depending on how you build your own responses to assignments, you may need to seek out more sophisticated technical skills. Your investment in your own learning outcomes will show.

### **Attendance/Participation/Professionalism**

This course covers a wide range of material and we have a lot of work to do together. First off (and so important), attendance is foundational. Making it to class on time and being present for the lectures, assignments, and discussions is essential to your success in COMM 368 and a sign of mutual respect. Second, teamwork is a central aspect of our daily class life, so please come prepared to talk about the readings and issues of the day. Both the professor and your peers will be supporting and evaluating your participation throughout the semester. You are responsible to one another in fulfilling our shared course objectives that include in-depth participation and discussion grounded in the assigned material you will read before our class meetings.

Attendance counts as part of professionalism. Documentation for university-authorized absences must be cleared with the professor in advance. It is your responsibility to ask classmates for announcements you may have missed by arriving late. In the case of severe illness, death in the family, or religious holiday, the professor will help you find ways to make up the work.

In the unfortunate event that you fall ill, especially with a contagious ailment, please aid in preventing the spread of infection by not coming to class. Rather, submit the official documentation you are able to provide the professor when you are healthy and able to come to class.

### **Deadlines/Professionalism**

Assignments are due on the dates indicated in the syllabus schedule below by paper and email at the beginning of class unless otherwise specified. It is the responsibility of the student to manage any scheduling conflicts with the course or missed time. I will not grant extensions except in the direst of circumstances and under no circumstances will I grant an extension within 24 hours of a due date. So please plan your semester ahead of time. As the old adage goes: *Plan your work. Then work your plan!* Missed deadlines will be assessed a deduction of one third of a letter grade per day (e.g. from A- to B+ for 1 day late). The penalty for lateness begins immediately after class on the due date.

**All assignments must be completed in order to pass the course.**

### **Student Meetings**

I have regular drop-in office hours as indicated on the syllabus. You can also reach me via email to make an appointment to meet in person at my office. Missing a mutually agreed-upon meeting with me will negatively impact the professionalism component of your grade. Always follow through on your appointments, as they are for your benefit.

## **ASSIGNMENTS**

### RESEARCH PROJECT

**Ethnography Review (100 pts):** One fundamental component of ethnographic research (as opposed to something like interviewing or reporting) is connecting your own field experience to a broader scholarly discourse. One fundamental component of good research is reviewing the existing literature about your area of study to ensure you are building on a continuing conversation (rather than reduplicating work already done).

This assignment helps you begin both of those tasks by asking you to locate an ethnographic essay from the LUC libraries holdings. Ideally, this ethnography will have some relevance to the kinds of communities or questions you want to ask in your own research project. thus serving as the beginning

of your literature review. Once you find an article, write a brief (no more than 500 words) that reviews the method and findings and reflect on what you found interesting and where you have questions.

We will review these briefs in class and they will be evaluated for clarity of writing, conceptual rigor, and a demonstration of course terminology.

**Prospectus (150 pts):** Once you've begun initial research into an area, you generally develop a prospectus that outlines what you intend to study, the extant literature in the area (generally an attached annotated bibliography), how you intend to execute the research, and why the project is important/significant and what you hope to discover. A prospectus forces you to begin editing and shaping your thoughts, develop an economical writing style, and get fresh eyes on a project to identify potential adjustments or challenges to the project. The prospectus will also serve (with some editing) as good introduction to your research paper.

Your prospectus should be around 3 pages (not including bibliography) and will be reviewed in class and evaluated for clarity of writing, quality of research, conceptual rigor, and thoroughness of plan.

**Field Notes (100 pts):** Once you've done your review of existing literature and developed a plan, you need to go out into the field and begin the process of participant observation and note-taking that will yield thick description and valuable insight. This assignment provides you an incentive to take the note-taking process seriously and asks you to bring in your field notes in a format discussed in class and in readings so we can collectively reflect on strategies and processes.

Because field notes tend to be topic specific, researcher specific, and require ethical discretion, these will be graded less for what they contain and more on their level of detail and quality of format for future use.

**Research Paper (250 pts):** You've reviewed the literature, developed a plan, and gone into the field. Now it's time to put all those components together and produce a paper that describes the cultural communication practices of your identified community and discusses what you discovered in the process. Remember that the best qualitative research situates the author as a subjective and limited voice within the project (identifying biases and relations to the community) and acknowledges the limitations of the project while advancing knowledge as far as it responsibly can. I am reluctant to put a page or word requirement on this project because so much of the detail depends on what you find in your fieldwork and how ambitious your research questions are. The paper will be evaluated on the clarity of writing, quality of research, quality of fieldwork, responsible and ethical processes, conceptual rigor, and the reasonableness of your insights.

**Research Presentation (100 pts):** A final component of any research project is developing a presentation that makes your detailed research economical and accessible for others. As a final project for this course, you will be asked to create a four-minute presentation that describes how your work built off existing research and produced new insights about the communication practices of a community. Final format will either be covered in class or be digitally captured as a recorded presentation. Project will be evaluated for clarity, rigor, and professionalism.

**Grading Note:** *Because the research project involves multiple building block assignments, evidence of improved writing and research quality will be taken into account. If subsequent research assignments show improved writing and research quality, I will raise the grade of previous assignments based on those adjustments.*

## COURSE ACTIVITIES

**Reading Reviews (150 pts):** Because we are reading a handbook on ethnographic research alongside an example of ethnographic research, it is imperative that you stay on top of readings to ensure you learn how to practice this valuable method of research. While it should be self-evident that comprehending and discussing the readings is necessary to executing the research project, my experience has shown that without a mechanism for rewarding reading (or punishing not reading), students tend to neglect the reading. So, every meeting will involve some demonstration of preparedness to discuss and use the readings. It may involve a quiz, a pre-assigned review essay, an in-class reflection, or group discussion. The more prepared the class appears, the less likely it will be to use rudimentary assessments.

**Participation and Professionalism (150 pts):** Like most Communication courses, this one depends on the active engagement of students to bring new perspectives, voices, and ideas into discussion with core concepts. The first component of this contribution to the learning environment involves showing up on time, all the time (see attendance policy above). The second component is comporting yourself in a professional and courteous manner during course discussions. Disagreement is welcome, disparagement is not. The final component requires making your voice heard and contributions notable by engaging in class discussions. An online forum will be created to provide an additional opportunity for class discussion and all members should attend to those conversations as well.

### **TENTATIVE SCHEDULE**

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| 1/15 Course Introductions                          | 3/12 Handbook 113-128                              |
| 1/17 Camgirls 1-13                                 | 3/14 Handbook 129-150, Cam 115-121                 |
| 1/22 Handbook 1-12, Cam 15-31                      | 3/19 Handbook 151-158                              |
| 1/24 Handbook 13-21                                | 3/21 Handbook 159-167                              |
| 1/29 Handbook 22-28, Cam 34-53                     | 3/26 <b>FIELDWORK</b>                              |
| 1/31 Handbook 29-41                                | 3/28 <b>FIELDWORK</b>                              |
| 2/5 <b>ETHNOGRAPHY REVIEW PROJECT DUE IN CLASS</b> | 4/2 <b>FIELD NOTES DUE</b>                         |
| 2/7 Handbook 41-51                                 | 4/4 Handbook 168-181                               |
| 2/12 Cam 55-75                                     | 4/9 Handbook 182-195                               |
| 2/14 Handbook 52-64, Cam 77-95                     | 4/11 Handbook 196-200                              |
| 2/19 Handbook 65-81                                | 4/16 Paper workshop                                |
| 2/21 Handbook 82-91                                | 4/18 <b>RESEARCH PAPER DUE</b>                     |
| 2/26 Handbook 92-112, Cam 97-113                   | 4/23 TBA   |
| 2/28 <b>PROSPECTUS DUE</b>                         | 4/25 TBA   |
| 3/5-3/7 <b>SPRING BREAK</b>                        | FINALS WEEK  |
|  | 4/30: <b>DIGITAL PRESENTATIONS DUE BY 11:00 AM</b> |