

INF397C: Understanding Research

Instructor: Dr. Jacek Gwizdka

Syllabus – Spring 2017

Instructor: Dr. Jacek Gwizdka

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Office Hours: By appointment

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Class meetings: Wednesday 12pm-2:50pm, [UTA](#) 1. 208

Canvas @ UT: <https://utexas.instructure.com/>

Course schedule: in Canvas

Course Announcements (a.k.a. mailing list): via Canvas (make sure to configure your Canvas settings to receive notifications about announcement and messages)

Note: The class meetings schedule, along with assigned readings, and assignment due dates is in a separate document. They are also on Canvas.

COURSE INTRODUCTION

Every day you may hear, or read, many claims, such as:

"This toothpaste will whiten your teeth faster."

"Our study has shown that people are not using libraries due to the availability of online information."

"Our results indicate that 37% of library users want access to free Wi-Fi."

"Austin traffic worsened by 33% in the last year"

"This web site is better than the other."

"Taking this course will help you be a better information scientist." ☺

Unprepared information professionals – indeed, unprepared citizens! – are forced to consider the huge inflow of claims they hear every day, and either accept or reject them based on faith. Prepared professionals and citizens can, instead, consider the methods used and analyze the information on which the claims are made, and evaluate for themselves the likely goodness of the claims. This course aims to help you evaluate and understand such claims by helping you to understand quantitative and qualitative research methods, as well as a number of other approaches. Being able to critically examine research for quality and applicability and to discuss it intelligibly is an important competency of an information professional. Understanding the underpinnings of research is part of being a critical consumer of information. You may also find the need to conduct studies in your practice as a professional, whether you are an information architect, an archivist, a librarian, a UX specialist, or any other information professional. In this course, we will integrate the exploration of criteria-based research evaluation with hands-on experience.

The course is designed to help you develop skills and awareness for understanding research. The course will arm you with an appreciation for various ways to conduct research. Assignments will provide you with a chance to demonstrate that you understand the basics of these various approaches to research. We will engage in some lecture, some discussion, and some hands-on in-class exercises. I expect you to come out from this course being able to evaluate whether a piece of research you read about was appropriately designed and well conducted. Note that the fundamental goal of this course is not to empower you to conduct your own research, but rather to well prepare you to be critical consumers of research in your academic and professional careers. But we will practice some research methods too.

COURSE CATALOGUE DESCRIPTION

INF 397C is intended to be a broad survey of the goals, methods, processes, and products of systematic inquiry. The course prepares students to critically evaluate information studies research. The course makes no claim to comprehensiveness but rather looks at important forms of research used widely in the field.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

This class is designed to arm you with a scientist's skepticism and a scientist's tools to understand and evaluate research. That is not to say however that readers should be cynical about researchers' motives or achievements, but rather they should subject researchers' claims to appropriate scrutiny. Hence, the student who successfully completes this course will, at a general level:

- Recognize authors' philosophical stances towards research;
- Understand research design, and know how to evaluate the appropriateness of designs;
- Understand the difference between, and the relative benefits of, quantitative and qualitative research;
- Be aware of the main research designs and methods;
- Be better able to discern the quality or soundness of research.

More specifically, at the completion of the course you should be able to:

- Recognize when hypotheses, propositions, or research questions are appropriate;
- Understand descriptive statistics, and know how to represent a collection of numbers;
- Understand inferential statistics and hypothesis testing;
- Appreciate the strengths, weaknesses, and validity concerns of a variety of research methods.

COURSE PEDAGOGY and ORGANIZATION

Class time will be split between (typically short) content-based lectures, reading discussions & debates, group activities, and project work. The part of class time used for lectures will be devoted to highlighting course materials. The goal is to create a learning environment in the classroom where questions and concepts are discussed and analyzed and skills are developed collaboratively. This format requires participation of all class members. Students are expected to:

- Participate actively in all activities;
- Attend all class sessions; if a student misses a class, it is his or her responsibility to arrange with another student to obtain all notes, handouts and assignment sheets;

- Read all material prior to class; students are expected to use the course readings to inform their classroom participation and enable them to perform the class activities and assignments.
- Hand in all deliverables fully and on time. Late submissions will not be accepted unless an emergency is involved. In the event of an emergency, the student must contact the instructor as soon as possible. (see also Grading and Policies)
- Educate themselves and their peers. The successful completion of this course and their participation in the information professions depend upon the students' willingness to demonstrate initiative and creativity. Your participation in the professional and personal growth of your colleagues is essential to your success as well as theirs. Such collegiality is at the heart of professional practice. The in-class group activities and discussion of the assignments is designed to encourage this kind of collaboration.
- If needed, ask for additional help from the instructor or the Teaching Assistant.

MY PERSONAL GOALS FOR YOU IN THE COURSE

In addition to content-specific objectives reflected by the topics in the course calendar, I have these personal goals for each student:

- to get you to think deeply and carefully about the subject,
- to provide knowledge and skills useful to you in your career,
- to engender a deeper interest that can be pursued beyond this course,
- to make you proud of your achievements in this course, and,
- hopefully, to have a little fun in the process 😊 !

BOOKS AND READINGS

Main textbook: **Gray13:** Gray, D. E. (2013). Doing Research in the Real World. SAGE.

Note: Additional readings may be assigned as needed. Some will be provided for specific assignments. For details, please visit [Pages on Canvas](#).

CLASS LECTURE SLIDES

The PDF versions of class lecture slides, if any, will be posted on Canvas. You have permission to print a copy for your personal use; please do not post or share them online. This policy applies to all other course handouts too.

GRADING is based on homework = assignments (*due dates on Canvas*):

A1. IRB – Human Subject Certification	5%
A2. Research paper and its parts	5%
A3. Questionnaire Design GROUP	20%
A4. Experiment Design GROUP	20%
A5. Critique: Research article and popular media reporting	10%
A6. Survey, Quantitative Data Analysis and Presentation - GROUP	40%
Total	100%

Note: A3 and A6 go together and are what you may call a mini-project.

GRADING SCALE

- 96 or above (A: superior), 90-95 (A-: distinguished)
- 87-89 (B+: good), 84-86 (B: satisfactory), 80-83 (B-: barely satisfactory)
- unsatisfactory: 77-79 (C+), 74-76 (C), 70-73 (C-).

Note: Final grading does not happen just by calculations. I take into account many factors, and so your "Canvas points/%" are only a rough indication of the final grade. Ask when in doubt.

ASSIGNMENTS

Assignments are listed in the Grading section. They are also on Canvas along with their due dates. Even if the instructor doesn't announce an assignment in class, it's your job to know when you should be working on one and when they are due. Please ask when in doubt.

Submitting written homework and assignments

You must prepare your assignments using a word processor and submit it by uploading to Canvas by the due date/time. Please always use appropriate three- or four-letter file extensions in submitted filename (e.g., .docx for Word files, .pdf for Adobe portable document format. Please avoid submitting zip files). Assignments usually may not be submitted via email to either the professor or a TA.

Important: All documents that you are submitting should include on the front page of your submission your name (spelled in the same way as in the course roster), course number/name, instructor's name, semester and the date of submission. For group work, if applicable, please also always include on the front page all group member names, your project group number, and your project short name (or title). **Warning:** If you do not follow these requirements, your submission may be returned without a grade and without a possibility to re-submit it.

CLASS PARTICIPATION AND ATTENDANCE

Class participation includes active participation in lectures, presentations (Q&A) and in discussions. You are also expected to work diligently and cooperatively on in-class exercises.

You will not be graded directly on attendance. You are adults in a graduate-level course and are *expected* to attend every class. Beyond the occasional need to be absent from class for a good reason, please consider that much of the learning for the course occurs in class. You cannot participate in this learning if you are not present.

Poor attendance and poor participation will lower your grade; good attendance and good participation may improve it.

If you have to miss class for an extended period due to a protracted illness or similar reason, we will treat your needs as a special case and I will do everything I can to help you survive.

OTHER CLASS POLICIES

Due dates and times for handing in homework and assignments.

Unless otherwise indicated, all homework and project assignments must be turned in at the beginning of class on the due date. You should think of all due dates for assignments, especially project assignments, as firm. The tight schedule of deliverables throughout the whole semester makes it nearly impossible to slip or extend due dates. Any assignment that you do not hand in on time may be penalized in grading. If you are not able to complete an assignment by the due date, it would be best for you to hand in as much of it as you have done. You must prepare your

assignments using a word processor and submit it by uploading to Canvas by the due date/time. Please do not submit links to Google Docs. Assignments usually may **not** be submitted via email to either the professor or a TA.

Computer use in the classroom

You may use your laptops and other computing devices (e.g., tablets, smartphones) in the classroom. However, their use during class time is **restricted** to the class related activities. Students who use their devices for non-class related activities will be excused from the class and will have points deducted for their final grade.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism, as defined in the 1995 Random House Compact Unabridged Dictionary, is the "use or close imitation of the language and thoughts of another author and the representation of them as one's own original work." (as cited in Plagiarism (2017). Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plagiarism> accessed 2017.01.16.) If you use words or ideas that are not your own, you must cite your sources. Otherwise you will be guilty of plagiarism. Here's a resource designed to help you avoid plagiarism: www.lib.utexas.edu/plagiarism

Academic Honor Code

You are encouraged to discuss assignments with classmates, but anything submitted must reflect your own, original work. If in doubt, ask the instructor. Plagiarism (as described above) and similar conduct represents a serious violation of UT's Honor Code and standards of conduct:

- http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/scholdis_plagiarism.php
- <http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/conduct.php>

Students who violate University rules on academic dishonesty are subject to severe disciplinary penalties, such as automatically failing the course and potentially being dismissed from the University. ****PLEASE** do not take the risk.** We are REQUIRED to automatically report any suspected case to central administration for investigation and disciplinary hearings. Honor code violations ultimately harm yourself as well as other students, and the integrity of the University, academic honesty is strictly enforced. For more information, see the Student Judicial Services site: <http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs>.

Notice about students with disabilities

The University of Texas at Austin provides appropriate accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. To determine if you qualify, please contact the Dean of Students at 512-471-6529 or UT Services for Students with Disabilities. If they certify your needs, we will work with you to make appropriate arrangements. UT SSD Website: <http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssd>

Coping with stress and personal hardships

The [Counseling and Mental Health Center](#) offers a variety of services for students, including both individual counselling and [groups and classes](#), to provide support and assistance for anyone coping with difficult issues in their personal lives. As mentioned above, life brings unexpected surprises to all of us. If you are facing any personal difficulties in coping with challenges facing you, definitely consider the various services offered and do not be shy to take advantage of them if they might help. These services exist to be used.

Notice about missed work due to religious holy days

A student who misses an examination, work assignment, or other project due to the observance of a religious holy day will be given an opportunity to complete the work missed within a reasonable time after the absence, provided that he or she has properly notified the instructor. It is the policy of the University of Texas at Austin that the student must notify the instructor at least fourteen days prior to the classes scheduled on dates he or she will be absent to observe a religious holy day. For religious holy days that fall within the first two weeks of the semester, the notice should be given on the first day of the semester. The student will not be penalized for these excused absences, but the instructor may appropriately respond if the student fails to complete satisfactorily the missed assignment or examination within a reasonable time after the excused absence.

Weather contingencies

If the university is closed (for any reason) on an assignment due date, the assignment will be due at the beginning of the next class.

Electronic mail Notification Policy

In this course e-mail will be used as a means of communication with students. You will be responsible for **checking your e-mail regularly** for class work and announcements. If you are an employee of the University, your e-mail address in Canvas is your employee address.

All email concerning the class should be addressed to the TA with a copy to the instructor. We will sort out which of us should act on the message and will make every effort to answer your email in a timely fashion. However, you should not necessarily always expect to get an immediate reply. In particular, don't expect to get answers to questions about a homework or assignment within the last few hours before that assignment is due.

Please put **397C-UR** as part of the subject line of your email; that will help us identify your emails more quickly.

The University has an official e-mail student notification policy. It is the student's responsibility to keep the University informed as to changes in his or her e-mail address. Students are expected to check e-mail on a frequent and regular basis in order to stay current with University-related communications, recognizing that certain communications may be time-critical. Read the policy: <http://www.utexas.edu/its/policies/emailnotify.html>. You can find and change your official email address of record at https://utdirect.utexas.edu/apps/utd/all_my_addresses

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Course Schedule (subject to change) – Spring 2017

#	Date	Topic	Readings (do <i>before</i> class, except as indicated)	In class activity	Due – Assignments (due at the beginning of class, except as indicated)
1	Jan 18	Introductions, Ethics in Research (IRB)	Syllabus Gray13: Ch4	introductions	
2	Jan 25	What is a research problem? Theoretical perspectives and research methodologies.	Gray13: Ch1-3 Blaise + Hernon	How to read a research paper? Discuss epistemological positions and theoretical perspectives	1. IRB training certificate
3	Feb 1	Research methodologies and design: Quantitative and Qualitative	Gray13: Ch6-7	Discuss papers (quantitative & qualitative)	2. Parts of paper
4	Feb 8	Research methodologies and design: Mixed Methods	Gray13: Ch8	Debate methodologies	
5	Feb 15	Data collection methods: questionnaires, interviews, focus groups	Gray13: Ch14-15, 18	Questionnaire design	
6	Feb 22	Data collection methods: ethnography, observation, unobtrusive	Gray13: Ch16-17, 19	Experiment design	3. Questionnaire GRP1
7	Mar 1	Quantitative data analysis: descriptive statistics	Gray13: Ch22		4. Experiment design GRP2
8	Mar 8*	Assignment work - collect survey data			
9	Mar 22	Quantitative data analysis: inferential statistics	Gray13: Ch22	Data analysis	
10	Mar 29	Quantitative data analysis cont.	Gray13: Ch22 TBD	Data analysis	Progress check: Survey, data analysis GRP
11	Apr 5	Qualitative data analysis: grounded theory, coding, content analysis...	Gray13: Ch23		
12	Apr 12	Qualitative data analysis: cont.	Gray13: Ch23 TBD		5. Critique research in news
13	Apr 19	Presenting research results			
14	Apr 26	Other (TBD)			
15	May 3	Wrap up. Getting involved in research		Present survey results (posters)	6. Survey, data analysis & presentation GRP1

* Dr. Gwizdka away at an academic conference.

Most readings are from the textbook: **Gray13**: Gray, D. E. (2013). *Doing Research in the Real World*. SAGE.

Note: Additional readings may be assigned as needed. Some assignments come with extra readings.