

Research in Geography
(GRG 390L)

Syllabus for Spring, 2010

Unique number: 37540

Class Hours: Tuesdays/Thursdays, 2.00-3.15

Dr. Jennifer Miller
GRG 324, 232-1587
jennifer.miller@austin.utexas.edu

Miller Office Hours:

Dr. Leo Zonn
GRG 202, 232-1586
zonn@mail.utexas.edu

Zonn Office Hours:
Tuesday 10.00-11.00,
Wednesday 1.00-2.00,
Or by appointment

A. Course Purpose and Objectives

This course is about research in Geography, more specifically research design in Geography. This latter term refers to the overall formulation of a research project, from its inception to completion. The careful, thorough, ordered, and informed construction of this design is a prerequisite for a successful and valuable research outcome, be it in Geography, another discipline, or in interdisciplinary settings. An essential presumption of this process is that the structure of this design must *always* include several specific and essential components. The character of each of these components is likely to vary dramatically from one project to the next, but they *must* be present. Another (and closely related) presumption is that these components must be highly integrated, interactive, and symbiotic with one another. The need for outlining these parts and the ways in which they are related is absolutely essential for quality research, regardless of its subject matter. You must always remember, however, that there is never one and only one possible design combination for your subject at hand. It is your task to explore the many possible combinations and find the one that is right for you and your successful research project!

So, what are these components and what does it mean to formulate a research design? How do you do it? How do you do it for your subject at hand? These questions may seem particularly daunting because of the highly eclectic and inclusive nature of Geography. We have available to us an array of conceptual and topical perspectives within a virtually infinite number of research settings, and yet we have to make decisions, we have to make choices, as to how we put together an approach, a design, as to how to conduct research. These questions are our task at hand; these questions are the source and heart of the purpose and objectives of this class.

A primary concern of this course, then, is with research design, with *your* research design, the one that constitutes the frame of your thesis, dissertation, or even a major publication. We are interested in the structure of that frame, in the way you intend to conduct or are conducting your research, and with the ways and means you can justify those choices you are making. But

clearly and importantly, this course is not solely about design; there is a second part, which reflects the immortal words of David Byrne: “well, how did I get here?” This second (and very closely related to the first) focus of this course is an exploration of those frames from which you drew your approach. That is, what are the directions in geographic research that have influenced the way in which you are constructing your research? A related question to you is: are these the most appropriate and most contemporary possible approaches available to you? In sum, then, we are interested in the design of your research *and* with the realm of possibilities from which you have drawn your ideas.

We believe that it is a mistake to try and explore the discipline as a whole and within this frame in one semester, and so we will engage contemporary geography in the context of the research being conducted by *you*. Some issues will be left out. If nobody is working on post-colonial theory, Lefebvre and urban design, synoptic heavy rainfall events, nonequilibrium in ecosystems, or chaos theory in geomorphology, we may not get there, at least in any detail. Conversely, the areas in which you are engaged will become of interest to all. This means that the individual who conducts research on intra-urban migration and neighborhood change will be learning about contemporary landscape ecological changes in Botswana emanating from government policy, and vice versa. Both will be learning about the subjects at hand, certainly, but more important, s/he will be learning about the ways in which the research design for the respective topic has been developed and will become familiar with the frameworks from which the choices have been made. We will be reading *many* examples so we know how others who are a step ahead of us are doing it.

As we will soon learn and detail, ad nauseam, the two major parts to the research design are the theoretical framework and methodology. The first provides the set of assumptions, guidelines, and questions for the work to be done, while the second tells us how you are going to do it. And, as noted above, the two must be meticulously linked. Now, let us add yet another important presumption of this course, namely, that an essential path to discovering the combination of theory and methodology that is just right for you is to read, read, and then read some more! How can you know if you are choosing the best direction if you don't know the alternatives? There is no substitute for knowing the literature of your subject. What you choose and why you choose it is yet another challenge, but you must be aware of all the choices. An important implication here is that you must be aware of alternatives to the direction you have chosen, which makes the justification for your work yet simpler. So, did I mention that you need to explore the literature of your field and that you do this by reading?

Well, how do *we* (as a class) get there? Over the course of the semester, you will be presenting to your colleagues the nature of your research design *and* the sources that help you construct it, that is, the nature of your field and the range of alternatives you considered when making your choice. The product of your work will certainly be an outline of your research design, but as important, it will be a detailed description of the essence of your research area(s) and a justification for your choices. For some, this may mean an original outline for MA work to be done, for others, it may be Chapter One (or Two) of your dissertation. Your work will be compared, then, with progress you have made on your project, and not necessarily with the final product vis a vis your colleagues. You will be reading works in your area and presenting them to the class, you will be writing justifications of your choices, you will be demonstrating the

linkages between different components of your proposal (e.g., why this methodology, given that theoretical frame?), and you will be presenting your research directions to colleagues (Jennifer and Leo included) who may not know the nature of your area; that is, you have to make the whole process intelligible to a wider geographic audience. We will do all this through some assigned readings, many readings of your choice, and, quite important, through the demonstration of the research process by faculty and advanced graduate students who “have been there and done that.” These visitors will provide insight into the many ways research is designed, which will include the same basic themes we will be emphasizing over and over.

There is more detail, much more detail, to come!

B. Schedule and Subject Itinerary

Given that this is a seminar and that exploration is the key to our collective success, Jennifer and Leo believe in little detailed structure. We will continue to pursue the same fundamental themes that surround research design over and over again, albeit in changing forms. This is going to be cool!

C. Grading

The following percentages will be used to calculate your grade

Class participation	25% of your total grade
Projects, papers	25% of your total grade
Final Presentation	10% of your total grade
Final Proposal	40% of your total grade

Participation is an essential part of a seminar, so please be prepared to discuss the subject at hand, particularly within the frames and intentions of this course. This also means that you should be prepared to discuss all assigned readings. The fact that half of your final grade is earned at the end of the semester may seem a bit steep, but the idea is that this course involves an accumulation of knowledge, perspectives, practices, and critical ways of thinking. In terms of grade, then, you must be able to demonstrate a comprehensive set of skills, abilities, and perspectives to formulate a research project *within the frame of major geographic discourses*; in essence, you need to describe your research in terms of its conceptual genesis. Providing the design of a project, no matter how clever and appropriate, is not enough. It must include the roots and sources of its development and strong justifications for the theoretical frames you have chosen, including those that are available and yet not chosen.

Finally, an “A” grade in a graduate seminar is for superior work, while a “B” grade is for very good work and a “C” is for achievement that is not acceptable at the graduate level. Pluses and minuses are given at UT for graduate courses. The purpose of this statement is to let it be known that a “B” or B+ is not for low quality work and that it is possible that some of you will earn that grade. But, this is NOT a zero-sum game, which means you are being compared to a standard, not to one another.

D. Readings

There will be many assigned readings by me or our visitors for some classes, while at other times you will do your own readings and provide summaries and discussion. There are no assigned texts, but *The Dictionary of Human Geography* (2000), edited by Johnston, Gregory, Pratt, and Watts (Malden: MA, Blackwell Publishers) is really a must for most of you, including those in GISc. There is much in the book that would be of interest to the physical geographer, although there is a *Dictionary of Physical Geography*, through the same publishers. They are surprisingly inexpensive; around \$40 apiece through Amazon. And trust me, they are quite sophisticated and valuable; they are not simple listings of geographic terms. I use mine often.

I realize you know the important journals of Geography and of your sub-disciplinary areas, but now is time to get yet more familiar with them and their brethren you don't yet know. You should know *every* article published over the last ten years in the *Annals of the AAG*, for example, that deals directly with your subject matter. You should spend time (fortunately you can do it on the web) getting to know *Progress in Human Geography* and/or *Progress in Physical Geography* as a start. Clearly, knowing the literature in your research area and in related directions is essential if you are going to make the right choices in developing your research design, so I strongly encourage you to start exploring the journals in your research directions. Beyond the journals, of course, is a world of books, chapters, and other assorted publications relevant to your work. Get to know them!

E. Very Basic Rules of the Game

1—Attendance is expected and is included in the class participation part of your grade. Less than ideal attendance is likely to impact your grade negatively. This is particularly important, given that we meet only once a week.

2—We will be using Blackboard some, which will often help with the articles, although many/most can be taken right off the web through our library.

3—Late assignments are not accepted. Please, no exceptions.

4—All written assignments must be typed and proofed for spelling, typographical errors, and major grammatical errors. This IS graduate school, after all!

5—We expect everyone to use email as a regular form of staying in contact.

6—The final project will be comprised of a presentation and a paper. The presentation will be a formal 20 minute lecture that will be given to our class and to invited guests. It will be followed by a question and answer period. The presentations will be scheduled for the last two weeks of the semester. There is no minimum for your paper, but we suspect it should be at least 15-20 pages, which includes the all-important sections on literature, theoretical background, methodology, justification, etc. etc. We will talk about this much more in the future.

7—Finally, we expect all students to conduct themselves with respect toward one another (professors and students) and to observe the fundamental canons of honesty and integrity.