

PLAN FOR SOCIOLOGY 525—SURVEY PRACTICUM SPRING 2003

Welcome to the 2005 Practicum in Survey Research! I am looking forward to teaching this course and hope that you will enjoy it as well. I also hope that it will provide you with survey skills useful to your career, regardless of your discipline or where your accomplishments take you.

Please read this document very carefully. It's important! In it I'll described how the course is to be taught, what you can expect from me, and what I expect of you.

WHAT THIS COURSE IS ABOUT

My overriding goal is to help you learn skills necessary for conducting high quality sample surveys.

This course is taught as a practicum in which the development of theoretical knowledge about how the design and implementation of surveys is linked to exercises in which that knowledge will be applied to solving practical survey design problems.

I started teaching this course in the late 1970s, when it became apparent to me that the correlation between doing well in a literature/textbook-oriented methodology course, and being able to design and execute surveys, was rather modest. Graduate students who seemed quite fluent when describing how a survey should be conducted, often did quite poorly when asked to design and carry-out a survey. I interpreted that to be a problem of how survey methods were taught, rather than a measure of people's capabilities.

It was also apparent to me that many recipients of WSU graduate degrees follow career trajectories that demand knowledge of how to design, implement, and interpret survey results. Careers are difficult to anticipate. However, if past students are a reasonable indication, many of you who expect never to do a survey in your career are not going to have that expectation realized. If you are one such person, I hope this course will help you do any surveys you undertake well.

My background encourages me to teach this course as a practicum. Nearly all of my career has been spent working on other peoples' surveys, as well as my own, and trying to figure out how to produce good data while meeting "client" expectations for being cost-effective and not being wrong when thousands or even millions of dollars were at stake.

Although I have been on the WSU Sociology faculty for 34 years, I have had the opportunity to work on surveys in each of the major sectors of the survey industry—government, university and private sector. Since 1986, I have held a part-time appointment in the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center, which each year conducts about 50 survey projects worth \$1 ½ - \$3 million. Most are conducted for federal, state and local governments, and university faculty. The predominant modes for conducting them include telephone (using our 55-station CATI facility in the Research Park), mail, and the internet. From 1991-1995, I served as the U.S. Census Bureau's Senior Survey Methodologist and provided leadership for designing new procedures that were used in the 2000 Decennial Census in an effort to improve response rates and data quality. I have also worked on survey designs for a number of other federal agencies. In addition, I have interacted with private sector survey organizations, e.g., The Gallup Organization. I have served as one of their Senior Scientists since 1995, an affiliation that provides me access to how large-scale public opinion, political, employee performance, marketing and customer satisfaction surveys are done under enormous time pressures. One of my objectives is to bring these experiences to bear in a useful way in teaching this survey practicum.

COURSE CONTENT AND TIMING

This course is taught every three years. Each time I teach it there is approximately a 30% change in course content. The change will be at least that amount this semester. The survey methodology discipline continues to change rapidly. A tentative outline and initial set of assigned readings is attached.

I will constantly be updating the outline as I work out details for practicum experiences. For example, I plan to take you out to the telephone laboratory and teach you how telephone interviews are conducted in our research center. I also plan to introduce you to cognitive interviews. To do that I need to get you scheduled in facilities that are being used for different purposes and need to depend upon staff who have project deadlines to meet.

Some of the practicum activities have not yet been selected. I usually try to pick current problems that someone is trying to solve. That helps give a currency to the work that I think makes the course and the work more interesting. It also places an emphasis on relying on current knowledge.

One of the implications is that the few people at WSU who have taken this course before may not be a particularly good source of information about course activities. A few will be similar to ones I have used in the past, but many will not. The amount of change that has happened in the last three years, e.g. visual design and layout of questionnaires, is enormous.

We will not cover all aspects of surveying. For example, this course emphasizes measurement and nonresponse issues more than sampling and coverage issues.

WHAT DO I MEAN BY PRACTICUM?

This should become evident as the course proceeds. Simply put, I mean that I expect you to learn to solve survey problems. Instead of being able to recite what criteria should be used in deciding which survey mode is the best one to use in a particular situation, I expect people to be

able to tell me which survey mode to use and why.

I start with the assumption that you have had had some exposure to basic research methods. My goal is to try to start this course at a level one step beyond learning the basic concepts of measurement, reliability, validity, etc. In some ways this course tends to invert the learning process, starting with a problem, and then working backwards as far as we need to go to get the tools needed for solving it.

I expect to give you nine practicum assignments, spread throughout the semester. Two are very brief and a couple are lengthy. Most will be individual assignments, but some may involve teams. These variations are intentional. In the practical world of surveying, people sometimes have to succeed as individuals, and sometimes as members of a team. Good interactional skills, and holding up your part of getting an assignment done well and on time, are essential.

Here are some examples of Practicum assignments I have given in the past:

- Recommend which survey mode to use for a survey.
- Experience a cognitive interview
- Revise a set of survey questions into an acceptable format
- Convert a questionnaire from one mode into one that is acceptable for another mode.
- Solve a visual design and layout problem for a web or mail questionnaire.
- Go through the experience of being trained to conduct a CATI telephone interview.

I am constantly on the look out for things that I think will make good practicum assignments, requiring you to absorb principles and literature, search for creative solutions, and produce a product that will be convincing to the target user. This process will become much clearer with the first practicum assignment that will be handed out the second day of class.

TEACHING AND LEARNING METHODS

We are scheduled to meet twice per week, *Tuesdays and Thursdays, from 1:25pm to 2:40pm in the Smith Center for Undergraduate Education (The CUE), Room 407*, Some sessions (subgroups and/or individuals) will be held in Wilson Hall. Others will be held in the SESRC offices at the Research Park. Occasionally class sessions will be canceled in lieu of experiences that have to occur outside of normal classroom hours. At certain times the location of class may be changed with fairly short notice.

Lectures and Other Types of Learning Experiences

On average I'll present one lecture a week. Sometimes classes will be devoted mostly to interaction and discussion around a problem or issue.

I am not sure of the exact nature of some of the practicum activities because they are still being developed and depend upon commitment from others. Also, I like to be able to take advantage of new opportunities that become available in order to keep the topics current. See the Tentative Outline for a general listing.

One consequence of focusing on practicum activities in this course is that the instruction will be

less linear than it sometimes is in graduate courses. For example, we will talk about web and telephone surveys throughout this course, rather than only during the assigned weeks. And, the order of topics is likely to get adjusted from time to time.

Evaluation

Each practicum assignment will be read, commented on and graded. There will also be one cumulative examination, which will be given sometime during the last month of the course—it will be scheduled a minimum of three weeks ahead of time, and may be either in-class or take-home. I will decide the form mid term.

Course grades will take into account the examination and participation, as well as performance in each practicum activity.

It is important to the learning process that you be in class. Much of what I want to help people learn will happen there, rather than through doing the readings and assignments.

If you anticipate that you are likely to miss more than one or two class periods, I suggest that you not take the class.

TEXT AND READINGS

There are two texts. One of them is Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method, 2nd edition, John Wiley: NY, by Don A. Dillman. It is a complete rewrite of my 1978 book. The second book is Internet Data Collection by Samuel Best and Brian Krueger (Sage Publications).

If you have a limited background in survey methods, I want to encourage you to obtain How to Conduct Your Own Survey, by Salant and Dillman, and read it completely the first week of class. (*It's in the library and in the Bookie under WSU authors, or can be obtained from Amazon.com or other outlets.*)

In addition, I will put papers on reserve in the Sociology Department main office (204 Wilson Hall). These will be available for you to check out for two hours or overnight after 3 P.M. I use this system rather than the library because of the ease of adding things quickly. If there is any problem accessing these materials, please see me. Part of the agreement for putting materials on reserve in this way is that the main office only provides the space and does not deal with any problems, so you will need to see Tammy Small, or me, if something is missing.

WEB PAGE

My web page url is: <http://www.sesrc.wsu.edu/Dillman/>

I will post certain assignments onto my web page. However, some materials will be handed out in class, and printing them from the web page will not be possible.

OFFICE HOURS AND AVAILABILITY

My appointment at WSU is 10% teaching in Sociology, 40% research and administration in the SESRC, and 50% research in Rural Sociology. The expectations from each of these units differ and they often compete for the same block of time. One of the things that helps me most in being able to meet everyone's expectations is to plan ahead and make appointments. I would really appreciate your trying to work with me in that way.

My office is 137 Wilson Hall, and I can be reached at 335-1511 (fax 335-0116). My home phone is 334-1141 and my e-mail address is dillman@wsu.edu. Kennon Kuykendall is enrolled this class and is also assigned to me as a teaching assistant. He will be responsible for maintaining materials in the sociology department, scheduling people for time slots for some of the practicum experiences, and other things that I will mention as the class proceeds. If you have questions and cannot reach me, I suggest that you get in touch with him. The best time to schedule an appointment with me is after class.

Please do not try to see me or schedule an appointment just prior to class. I am usually preparing for class and often need that time to make sure I get to class with all of the materials that I need.

OTHERS WHO WILL HELP WITH THIS CLASS

During the semester you will meet a number of others who help with this class. I will introduce them as the course evolves. Many of them are employees of the SESRC and I will provide a list of our staff to you later on.

The SESRC is a resource that few universities in the U.S. have, especially at the level it has achieved under the leadership of John Tarnai, our current Director. And, I really appreciate his willingness for SESRC staff to come into class and for us to visit SESRC offices. Whenever we "invade" SESRC offices for practicum activities, please be sensitive to the other work that may be going on around you and the value of their time. The SESRC is supported mostly by soft money, i.e., grants and contracts. And, the 20 staff on appointments and more than a hundred others who work their on a part-time basis, are often working under difficult deadlines.

WORKLOAD AND TIMING

Frequently, I have been asked when the workload for this course is heavy and when it is light. I think you'll find that there is considerable work to do throughout the course, and that this is a hard course to ignore for a period of time. It is also a hard one to focus on to the exclusion of other things.

THIRTY PEOPLE AND MY WORK SCHEDULE

The enrollment maximum for this course is 30 people, and when I looked that is the number that had enrolled. I have found that in the past I can handle this number without losing the interactive quality of the class that I believe is important. However, the size of the class combined with different disciplinary backgrounds and interests, makes this course a little different than many of the graduate courses you have taken in the past.

I expect that everyone who is in the class will take it for credit, rather than as an auditor.

Occasionally I have to be away from Pullman. Much of that travel is connected to SESRC contracts, travel associated with grant funding, and my responsibilities in the Department of Community and Rural Sociology. Often I have little choice on when certain meetings I need to attend are scheduled. I have tried to minimize the number of trips I have during this course, but still will be gone at certain times. When I am away classes will likely be held as scheduled. Those are the times that I tend to schedule certain practicum activities, or SESRC staff and others who will be in class to teach certain topics and share their skills with you.

NON DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT

In order for me to show or expose you to certain material during the course, I will ask you to sign a nondisclosure agreement. It's purpose is to maintain confidentiality of anything that you hear or see that may be associated with someone's response to a survey. All SESRC employees are required to sign the same agreement. An example, of the concern we have is that when we visit the Research Park you may hear a live interview in process. This is a requirement that will be discussed and taken care of in an early class period.

YOUR APPROACH TO THIS CLASS

People who have taken this course have approached it differently. A student who once took this course introduced himself to me by saying that he didn't believe surveys were good for anything, and wanted to know how to prove it. A faculty member once told me, "I really like you, Don, because you (the SESRC) do all of the "scut" while I get to do the really important stuff (analyze the data)." Someone else said he wanted to do all of the reading assignments in the practicum, but didn't see why he should be evaluated on the basis of whether he could write questions acceptable for a telephone survey or whether he could learn how to operate a CATI system, because of only being interested in the theory of how to do surveys.

With that as background, I have learned to be cautious about asking people their reasons for taking this class. Nonetheless, I like to know about them. My reasons for being here are that I enjoy survey design and data collection immensely. It is fun to watch the art and science, and sometimes the politics of sponsorship become intertwined. I am hopeful that you'll also gain an appreciation for all aspects of data collection, and that you'll leave the course prepared to do your own surveys, feel confident when faced with these challenges, and even enjoy the process of learning how to constantly improve them.

However, if you only want to contemplate theoretical perspectives, then you'll probably find some other course to be more enjoyable. I should also forewarn anyone who is only interested in only the practical aspect and not the theory of what makes methods work, this course may also be less enjoyable than another course might be. The art and science of doing quality surveys involves many complexities, and trying to sort through them without using the logic and power of theoretical formulations is as unthinkable to me as the opposite approach. If you are thinking of this as an "applied" course with no theory to learn, I'm afraid that this is not the course for you.

I hope that you will approach this class as something that could be a lot of fun, and that you are willing to engage in new ways of thinking about some issues you may not have been exposed to before or that you may have learned in a somewhat different way.

Welcome to the world of surveying, and let the fun begin!

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