**TECH2503-18 Community Media Production**

**Workshop Seventeen - Participant Observation**

**1      Activity - Assessment Methods**
- There are different approaches that can be used to assess community projects.
- These approaches tend to fall into two categories: quantitative and qualitative.
- The difference is often explained as that which can be counted, and that which needs to be understood.
- So quantitative methodologies use measurement and calculation.
- And qualitative methodologies use stories and accounts.
- Both approaches are valid forms of research, but they can't be applied or used in the same circumstances, nor will they tell us the same things.
- Each will paint a different picture.
- Read through the notes and the links below, and note how you might use either approach as a way of evaluating the activities you are promoting and supporting in the community media cafés.
- Discuss these difference in a small group and draw a mind-map of the main issues that you think need to be explored further and tested in your evaluation of the community media cafés.

**1.1      Qualitative vs Quantitative Assessment**
"Using qualitative assessment methods rather than purely data-based information is crucial to understanding many community issues and needs. Numbers work well to show comparisons, progress, and statistics of community efforts, but they cannot express motives, opinions, feelings, or relationships. This section discusses how to use qualitative assessment methods and when to implement them into community planning."
"Qualitative methods of assessment are ways of gathering information that yield results that can't easily be measured by or translated into numbers. They are often used when you need the subtleties behind the numbers – the feelings, small actions, or pieces of community history that affect the current situation. They acknowledge the fact that experience is subjective – that it is filtered through the perceptions and world views of the people undergoing it – and that it's important to understand those perceptions and world views."
http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/qualitative-methods/main

- *Quantitative methods* are those that express their results in numbers. They tend to answer questions like "How many?" or "How much?" or "How often?"

- *Qualitative methods* don't yield numerical results in themselves. They may involve asking people for "essay" answers about often-complex issues, or observing interactions in complex situations.

**2      Discussion - Qualitative Data Collection**
- Collecting evidence that suits the situation you are participating in and observing can be done in a number of ways.
- Identify and note the data collection techniques that you think might be useful in helping you to tell the story of what is happening in your community media café?
- What digital media capture techniques can you use?
- What forms of media might you collect as you interact with people, and how might you use this information in your fieldnotes, reports and blogs?

**2.1      Qualitative Data Collection Techniques**
- There are a number of qualitative methods that can be used in assessment of issues or community needs. We'll list the major ones here, and look at them in more detail later in the section. They include:

**2.2      Individual interviews**
- These may be structured interviews, where the questions are determined beforehand, or unstructured conversations that are allowed to range wherever the interviewee wants to go in relation to the general

topic.
- Even in structured interviews, there may be room for both interviewers and interviewees to pursue topics that don't relate directly to answering the original questions.
- The difference, however, is that in a structured interview, all those questions are formally asked, and the interviewer does her best to make sure they're answered.

### 2.3    Group interviews
- These are similar to individual interviews, but involve two or more interviewees at a time, rather than one. (Sometimes, these are unexpected – the interviewee's mother and sister are present, and insist on being part of the conversation.)
- Group interviews have some advantages, in that interviewees can act as a check on one another (I remember that happening in a different way…), and stimulate one another's thinking.
- At the same time, the interviewer has to be somewhat of a facilitator, making sure that no one person dominates, and that everyone gets a reasonable chance to speak.

### 2.4    Observation
- Here, someone actually goes and looks at a place or event, watches situations or interactions, or takes part in the life of the community or a population while recording what he finds as a result.

### 2.5    Community or other large meetings
- These meetings allow a range of people a chance to express their opinions and react to others'.
- They can draw on a large pool of opinions and knowledge at one time, and uncover disagreements or differences that can then be discussed.

### 2.6    Interpretation of records, transcripts, etc.
- This can range from qualitative analysis of quantitative data (like the assumption of the researcher in the introduction to this section that people who are doing well won't be interested in an adult education program), to using quantitative data as a jumping-off point for qualitative assessment, to case studies (detailed examinations of individual cases).
- The last are not always useful in assessing community issues or needs, but they can be very effective in convincing policymakers or funders of the importance of those issues and needs.

### 3    Discussion - Why use qualitative methods of assessment?
- It is useful to understand the practical differences between quantitative and qualitative data collection, because they tell us different things about a social situation.
- What do you think is the benefit of using an approach to data collection and evaluation that is founded on narrative, or storytelling principles?
- Read through each of the following points, and rate them in terms of their importance to your project, what you are trying to achieve, and the difficulty in collecting this information.
- How will you overcome these difficulties?
- How might you share the stories and your insights that you gain?

### 3.1    Assessment Dimensions
The basic reason to use qualitative methods is that there are some kinds of questions and some dimensions of community assessment that can be better addressed by them than by quantitative methods. The methods you use should be determined by the questions you're asking. Since it may be hard to convince policymakers and others that qualitative methods are useful, however, why bother to use them at all? Some of the major reasons:
- **They answer some questions that quantitative measures can't.** Quantitative methods may tell you how many people do a certain thing, but they're unlikely to tell you how or why they do it. Qualitative methods can better answer the how and why questions, and also provide other information in the process.
- **They connect directly with the population and the community with which you're concerned.** In assessment, the best sources of information are those closest to what's being assessed: they experience it more than anyone else. Qualitative methods generally go directly to those sources with more complex

questions than quantitative methods.

- **They can get at certain underlying realities of the situation.** Once again, quantitative methods often don't answer "why?" questions, while qualitative methods can tell you about the history of the community or issue, who the significant supporters and opponents of various ideas are, whom people in the community listen to, etc. In an assessment situation, these can be crucial pieces of information.
- **They can involve the population of interest, or the community at large, in helping to assess the issues and needs of the community.** This participation fosters a sense of ownership and support for the efforts.
- **They often allow for a deeper examination of the situation or the community than quantitative methods do.** Quantitative methods, although helpful, can tend to put people or events in specific categories, ask for yes-no or multiple-choice answers, often eliminating complexity. Qualitative methods allow for following promising directions ("Why do you say that?"), and can lead to the discovery of important information that quantitative results wouldn't have touched on.
- **They allow for the human factor.** While the information obtained through qualitative methods is often subjective, it is also often identified as such, and can be analyzed accordingly.

### 3.2 Interviews

- Interviews can be structured or unstructured. In a strictly structured interview.
- The same questions in the same order are asked of everyone, with relatively little room for wandering off the specific topic.
- Semi-structured interviews may also be based on a list of specific questions, but – while trying to make sure that the interviewee answers all of them – the interviewer may pursue interesting avenues, or encourage the interviewee to talk about other related issues.
- An unstructured interview is likely to be more relaxed – more like a conversation than a formal interview.

### 3.3 Observation

What do we mean by "observation?" For our purposes, there are essentially two kinds: direct and participant observation.

### 3.4 Direct Observation

- This is the practice of examining or watching places, people, or activity without interfering or taking part in what's going on.
- The observer is the proverbial fly on the wall, often unidentified, who does nothing but watch and record what she sees and/or hears.
- A direct observation to see how people use a public park, for instance, might consist of one or more observers simply sitting in one place or walking around the park for several hours, or even several days.
- Observers might come back at different times of day, on different days, or at different times of year, in order to understand as much as possible of what goes on in the park.
- They might occasionally ask questions of people using the park, but in as low-key and unobtrusive a way as possible, not identifying themselves as researchers.

### 3.5 Participant Observation

- This involves becoming to some extent part of the life of the people you're observing – learning and taking part in their culture, their celebrations and rituals, and their everyday activities.
- A participant observer in the park above might introduce himself into the activities he observes – a regular volleyball game, winter cross-country skiing, dog walking, in-line skating – and get to know well the people who engage in those activities.
- He would also monitor his own feelings and reactions to using the park, in order to better understand how its users feel about it. He would probably ask lots of questions, and might well identify himself as a researcher.

### 4 Some Guidelines for Reaching that Goal

- *Think carefully about the questions you want your observation to answer*. You may be looking at people's behaviour or interactions in a given place or situation, or the nature of social, physical, or environmental conditions in a particular place or circumstance. If you're clear about what you want to find out, you can structure your observation to get the best information.

- *Where and whom should you observe to answer these questions*? You wouldn't normally look for evidence of homelessness in the wealthiest neighbourhood in town, nor would you observe the residents of an Asian neighbourhood to find out something about the Hispanic population.
- *When and for how long should observation take place*? Observing commercial activity downtown on Sunday morning won't get you a very accurate picture of what it's actually like. You'd need to observe at both busy and slow times, and over a period of time, to get a real idea of the amount, intensity, and character of commercial activity.

## 5    Tips for Taking Field Notes
Begin each notebook entry with the date, time, place, and type of data collection event.
- Leave space on the page for expanding your notes, or plan to expand them on a separate page. (See the section above on "How do I expand my notes?")
- Take notes strategically.
- It is usually practical to make only brief notes during data collection. Direct quotes can be especially hard to write down accurately. Rather than try to document every detail or quote, write down key words and phrases that will trigger your memory when you expand notes.
- Use shorthand. Because you will expand and type your notes soon after you write them, it does not matter if you are the only person who can understand your shorthand system. Use abbreviations and acronyms to quickly note what is happening and being said.
- Cover a range of observations. In addition to documenting events and informal conversations, note people's body language, moods, or attitudes; the general environment; interactions among participants; ambiance; and other information that could be relevant.
  https://assessment.trinity.duke.edu/documents/ParticipantObservationFieldGuide.pdf

## 6    Participant Observation Steps
*Preparing for Participant Observation*
1.  Determine the purpose of the participant observation activity as related to the overall research objectives.
2.  Determine the population(s) to be observed.
3.  Consider the accessibility of the population(s) and the venues in which you would like to observe them.
4.  Investigate possible sites for participant observation.
5.  Select the site(s), time(s) of day, and date(s), and anticipate how long you will collect participant observation data on each occasion.
6.  Decide how field staff will divide up or pair off to cover all sites most effectively.
7.  Consider how you will present yourself, both in terms of appearance and how you will explain your purpose to others if necessary.
8.  Plan how and if you will take notes during the participant observation activity.
9.  Remember to take your field notebook and a pen.

*After Participant Observation*
10.  Schedule time soon after participant observation to expand your notes.
11.  Type your notes into computer files using the standard format set for the study.

## 7    Writing a Field Report
The purpose of a field report in the social sciences is to describe the observation of people, places, and/or events and to analyse that observation data in order to identify and categorize common themes in relation to the research problem underpinning the study. The content represents the researcher's interpretation of meaning found in data that has been gathered during one or more observational events.
We are all observers of people, their interactions, places, and events; however, your responsibility when writing a field report is to create a research study based on data generated by the act of designing a specific study, deliberate observation, a synthesis of key findings, and an interpretation of their meaning. When writing a field report you need to:

- **Systematically observe and accurately record the varying aspects of a situation**. Always approach your

field study with a detailed plan about what you will observe, where you should conduct your observations, and the method by which you will collect and record your data.

- **Continuously analyze your observations**. Always look for the meaning underlying the actions you observe. Ask yourself: What's going on here? What does this observed activity mean? What else does this relate to? Note that this is an on-going process of reflection and analysis taking place for the duration of your field research.

- **Keep the report's aims in mind while you are observing**. Recording what you observe should not be done randomly or haphazardly; you must be focused and pay attention to details. Enter the observation site [i.e., "field"] with a clear plan about what you are intending to observe and record while, at the same time, being prepared to adapt to changing circumstances as they may arise.

- **Consciously observe, record, and analyse what you hear and see in the context of a theoretical framework**. This is what separates data gatherings from simple reporting. The theoretical framework guiding your field research should determine what, when, and how you observe and act as the foundation from which you interpret your findings. http://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/fieldreport

### 7.1    How to Write Field Notes
Fieldnotes should be written as soon as possible after leaving the fieldsite, immediately if possible. Even though we may not think so when we are participating and observing, we are all very likely to forget important details unless we write them down very quickly. Since this may be very time-consuming, students should plan to leave a block of time for writing just after leaving the research context.
http://www.gpgrieve.org/PDF/How_to_write_Field_Notes.pdf


### 8    Activity – Community Media Cafe Planning

- Open the DMU Commons Wiki DIY-DMU Community Media Cafe page.
- https://wiki.our.dmu.ac.uk/w/index.php/Community_Media_Cafe
- Can you list the issues that you are tackling for the community media cafe project?
- What form do these issues take and how can you describe them?
- What are the main challenges and topics that are covered in these issues?
- Who is working in your group?
- How are the different tasks and roles allocated in your group?
- How do you keep in contact and where do you share ideas about your café projects?
- Can you list this information on this wiki page so that a visitor who knows nothing about this project can make sense of what you are working on?


### 9    Activity – Community Media Cafe Discussion

- Open Talk on the DMU Commons https://talk.our.dmu.ac.uk
- Use the topic 'Community Media Cafe' to share ideas about collaborative activities for the project.
- Use the Community Media Cafe category if you want to start other threads that are related.
- Can you share any of your blogs on DMU Talk that demonstrate the type of activities that you are working on?


### 10    Activity Blogging
- Can you write any key points from this session into a blog?
- How will you use links and embedded media in your blog post to enhance the discussion and information that you present?
- Do you think you can write in a way that prompts other people to respond and engage with what you have written?
- To what extent does your blogging demonstrate any of the evaluative skills outlined above?

**11 References**