Cognition in Contexts
LOC 308/LS 308
Spring 2017, Thursday 1:00 to 3:50
Annenberg Hall, Rm. G02

Professor Reed Stevens
Office hours: By appointment
Annenberg Hall, 319
reed-stevens@northwestern.edu

Teaching Assistant: Peter Meyerhoff
Office hours: By appointment
Annenberg Hall, G24
peter.meyehoff@u.northwestern.edu

COURSE OVERVIEW

There are two goals for this course: (1) to equip you with some concepts and methods for understanding and studying cognition and learning ‘in the wild’ and then (2) to put these concepts and methods to use in a design/change project of your own.

We have a few objectives that are embedded within these primary goals:
  • Understand how learning happens in informal and distributed contexts
  • Gain insight into your own styles and dispositions as a learner, researcher, designer, and organizational innovator
  • Understand the role of fieldwork and use it for authentic organizational design and change
  • Practice and build systematic skills to observe and understand everyday situations, communities, and organizations
  • Equip you with research-based cases and exemplars to help you see these phenomena in action — and how these might apply to your own life and work

The goal of the first part of the course is to introduce you to concepts and cases of cognition and learning across a range of contexts and to help you develop basic field methods for exploring these phenomena yourself. Cognition and learning are diverse and complex ‘socio-technical’ phenomena, though you might not get this impression from the two most overstudied and overgeneralized contexts for research on cognition and learning: laboratory psychology experiments and schools. These contexts will not be our focus, though they will be part of our discussion as counterpoints to our explorations of the many ways that the varying contexts of everyday life organize cognition and learning.

A foundational intellectual premise of the course is an ecological, cultural, and pragmatic one—that people learn, think, and act in ways that are adaptive to the specific and recurring situations and contexts in which they find themselves. Thus, our understandings of thinking and learning should reflect this range of situations, cultures, and contexts; learning, thinking, and collaboration happen everywhere, not just in schools and not just at the urging of university-based psychologists plying candy bars and iTunes gifts cards.
The intellectual traditions represented in this course cannot be entirely or even best understood from the armchair or the classroom, so a core part of the course experience involves a number of field activities that ask you to explore important concepts and methods that are represented in the readings. You do not need prior fieldwork experience to participate in these activities. Since fieldwork of this kind will be new to most of you, we will equip you with some basic tools and strategies for looking, listening, noticing, and recording events in everyday life. The primary reason the course meets once a week, rather than twice as is the norm for undergraduate courses at Northwestern, is to combine readings with these field activities, to combine reflective and critical discussion with active exploration of the ideas.

The possible uses for the kinds of discoveries one makes through fieldwork in everyday contexts are many. One is simply to broaden your understanding of how learning, cognition, and culture are organized differently across peoples, times, and places. This is the core goal underlying much of the tradition of liberal arts education. However, as befits the majors you have chosen here at Northwestern (Learning and Organizational Change or Learning Sciences), your interest may be in making change, in making things better in real organizations and communities. This is true for understanding and making changes in schools and other informal education places like museums, zoos, and community centers. The basic principles and practices are the same. First you try to understand how things work there, then you identify a need or a ‘chronic snag’ (a concept we will learn about and make good use of in this class) within that context, and then you engage in a design process that seeks to meet that need or ameliorate that chronic snag.

Should you be interested in business or other adult organizations (e.g. non-profits or NGOs), as many students in this course have typically been, many now argue that organizations must have deep and continually refreshed understandings of the people they serve. And they must understand fast-changing, heterogeneous, and increasingly global cultures and markets. Broadly speaking, there is a strong argument for the idea that fostering real and sustainable learning or organizational change—regardless of the particular organization—depends on the sort of research and concepts explored in this class.

The goal of the second part of the course is for you to put the concepts and methods for studying cognition and learning to work. In a small R&D team, you will conduct a small-scale field study on the Northwestern campus or in Evanston and then use that field study as the basis for what we call “a design for change”. Your design for change may involve a new or revised organizational practice, product, technology, or educational approach. The project will be successful if you can link the documentation of a chronic snag to a design that ameliorates the snag you have discovered. You will share your designs for change in two forms: in paper that you write as an individual and in a team presentation on the last day of class. You will present to your classmates and your instructors. But in keeping with a core design principle of this course to minimize school ‘busywork’ and maximize realistic work activities, you will present to group of invited expert stakeholders, who will be selected and invited based on the specific projects you are doing.
FEEDBACK, EVALUATION AND GRADING

Class Evaluation

To participate fully and successfully in the course, you should read the assigned texts carefully before each class. I strongly recommend you annotate the readings with your own questions, reactions, and connections—to other readings, fieldwork, and other personal experiences. (Having a ‘conversation’ with the readings in this active way will make a big difference in the depth of your understandings and your ability to use the ideas). The volume of assigned reading is not high. That is intentional, so that you can engage deeply with the papers that are assigned. Please read all of the assigned texts carefully and actively, generating your own questions and insights about them. One of the biggest opportunities you have in college is to learn from other people’s ideas and to put your ideas into interaction with those of your classmates and your professors. You sell your expensive and precious experience short if you don’t engage substantively with the papers and bring those engagements into the class discussions.

Weekly Reading Snapshots (7.5% of grade): To ensure preparation for in class discussion, each week you are required to write a response that minimally captures each of the assigned readings from your perspective. These must be uploaded to Canvas by Wednesday at 11 pm. If you have read closely and annotated, these should be straightforward and quick to put together. These also become a resource for you when you write the final paper. Required elements of these snapshot documents (1 for each assigned reading) are:

a. a 2-4 sentence summary of the article or chapter
b. a list of key concepts from the paper (1-3), with either a quoted definition or a definition of the concept in your own words
c. 1-2 sentences on what you found most personally relevant/useful
d. 1 question that the reading raises for you

Class Participation: (7.5% of grade): Class attendance is required. Since we only meet once a week, ONE unexcused absence will result in a participation grade of 0. IF you need to miss class, you are allowed ONE excused absence but you will need to arrange this beforehand with Professor Stevens, and you may be asked to do makeup work. You should bring copies of the readings to each class, preferably on paper, so you are not distracted (as we all can be) to look at other things that flow through your computer or hand-held devices. If you are on your computer, we ask that you not look at the common distractions to us all: Facebook, Instagram, news etc. If we observe you using these things during class, we will ask you privately to stop doing so. We also ask that put your phones away during class time (there will be at least one break and sometimes two each session). Everything
that appears on your phone can wait until the class is over. We will be strict about this. In courses you take at NU, the class participation grade is often a throw away category, but in this course we treat it seriously, because of the ideas of distributed contribution and shared enterprise that are so central to the intellectual premise of this course. If you never participate and appear unprepared, you should expect to receive a low grade for in class participation. If you make a genuine effort and come prepared with the interesting questions and ideas we know you have, you will get full credit. If you are less comfortable speaking frequently in class, you also have a digital opportunity to share your ideas, because the participation grade is composed of two things, in class participation and weekly postings to a discussion board. You are required to post one question per week to the discussion board. You will have already generated this for the weekly reading snapshot (item D in the list above) so you need only copy and paste that question into the discussion board. (You are also welcome to post more than one question). The additional participation requirement is that you reply to at least one of your classmates’ posts each week. **Your reply must be posted by 11 am on the day of class (Thursday), but the best time to do it is when you turn in your reading snapshot (Wednesday, 11 pm).** You are also welcome and encouraged to reply to more than one or to get into a multi-turn online discussion spurred by a question. As a fun and playful addition, the question that we see as generating the most thought provoking responses each week (without being intentionally inflammatory) will earn the question’s author recognition in the form of a fun and playful prize. At the end of the quarter, if anyone has won more awards than others (e.g. 2 or 3 vs. 1), that student will receive a bigger prize. We’ll read out the question and the response thread and make the award at the beginning of each class.

Field activity narratives (3 @ 15% each): The motivation for the field activities is straightforward: this type of research (probably like all research) is best understood by participating in it and then representing it in well-selected media. Each of the field activities should be represented in a short electronic document (2-5 page single-spaced pages). You may choose to use other forms of media in addition to words for documentation, and we encourage you to do so. Other media might include photos, videos, audio recordings, diagrams, and maps. However, whatever media you combine for these papers, the core of the paper should be a well-written, coherent narrative. In class after each of the field activities are due, we will use some of class time to discuss shared lessons and new questions that arose.

Team formation and project idea sketch (optional but with feedback provided): **You must form a team composed three or four members by Week 5 (April 27). Your team should then email project sketch by 5 pm Tuesday May 2**, and then we will provide you written feedback on your project sketch by Sunday May 7.

Final project presentation (20% of grade; earned by team): The presentations will be on the last day of class. The presentations will be made to the class and 3 expert guests, to be announced later and selected on the basis of your specific projects. Presentations will be approximately 15 minutes with 5 minutes for questions from the expert panel. Grading will be based on a combined score from class members, the expert panel, and us. Criteria for grading will be discussed later in the course but the basic criteria are: (1) Establishing
through fieldwork a chronic snag or systemic contradiction in socio-technical systems (you will learn more what is meant by socio-technical systems in the course) and (2) a “design for change” that addresses the snag or contradiction and (3) an argument for why the design for change should be implementable (and perhaps even sustainable).

Final paper (20% of grade, earned by individual): The final paper is each individual team member’s opportunity to write about his or her version of the final project. This is not a paper about your role in the project; it should be writing about the whole project. This paper is your way of putting it all together. This writing needs to be your own, though of course it will reflect joint work with your teammate(s). In addition to the two components described above that should be the basis for your presentation, this paper must also include an engagement with ideas from the course and at least some additional readings that are relevant to your project topic. You should use readings from the course—or other related readings that are appropriate to your project focus—to support your ideas about why the “design for change” you propose will likely be successful. The final paper is due right before the beginning of Finals Week (Sunday, June 4, 9 pm). It should be between 6 and 10 single-spaced pages, references excluded. Please use APA format for references. We will provide further details on the final project, the presentation, and final paper, as these get closer.

Class Readings

Week 1 (March 30) Introduction to Cognition in Contexts

Week 2 (April 6) The Argument for Fieldwork


(optional) Suri & Howard, “Going Deeper, Seeing Further”
(optional) Neisser, “Memory: What are the Important Questions?”
(optional) Suchman, Making Work Visible
Week 3 (April 13) Making the familiar strange and the practices of ‘othering’

First Field Activity Paper Due


Week 4 (April 20) Studying humans and non-humans working together

Second Field Activity Paper Due


Martin and Hanington, from Universal Methods of Design Observational Methods: 02, 06, 27, 42, 57, 59, 92


Week 5 (April 27) Snags, breakdowns, and disruptions as spurs to change

Third Field Activity Paper Due


Martin and Hanington, from Universal Methods of Design
Interactive Methods: 04, 20, 30, 62, 64, 76, 89

Experience architect, pp.166-192

Week 6 (May 4) Designing from what we learn in the field


Sara Cantor Aye, Designing Everything But the Food (Video)

(optional) Kelley & Littman, “Innovation begins with an Eye”

Week 7 (May 11) Learning 'on the job', in everyday life


Week 8 (May 18) What promotes or prevents organizational change?


Week 9 (May 25) Project support consultations

Week 10 (June 1) Final presentations

Finals Week (no class) Final paper due Sunday, June 4th, 9 pm. Both instructors will be available for additional consultations on final papers during Reading Week.