Sociology Course: Ethnomethodology, Conversation Analysis, and Interviewing

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This is a description of the graduate course I am teaching for the sociology department at Helsinki University. I am a sociologist who specializes in the study of interaction. More technically, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis are subfields in sociology concerned with the talk and embodied practices by which people assemble the features of their everyday lives. My course is designed to teach students (some of whom are post-doctorate scholars) the subject matter and the kind of work that ethnomethodology and conversation analysis involve. It includes tutorials on how to work with audio and video recordings of interaction in various settings. We are spending a part of the course on studying interviews of various kinds—educational testing, medical, news, employment, and survey interviews. This is because I have done research on the interactions in interviews, and because a number of the students have projects that are concerned with interactions in interviews.

My course is called a “24 hours course,” which means that there are 12 sessions during the semester, each lasting 90 minutes. This is about half the length of a graduate course at my home institution (the University of Wisconsin—Madison). That is, when I teach such a course at Madison, the semester is 15 weeks, and the class meets for 180 minutes per week. So obviously, here I have pared down the course and I require less reading and work on the part of students. That does not mean the course is any less rigorous, only that we cover less material.

For example, at my home institution I require students to read two or three scholarly articles per week, write comments on these articles, and develop a research paper over the course of the semester. In Helsinki, I am requiring students to read just one scholarly article per week, and to write a one page summary and critique of the article. There is no required research paper. They are also doing some small research exercises where they write their analyses of recorded interactional episodes. We go over these in class.

I developed my approach by consulting with my host, a professor in the sociology department. He advised me on how much work I could expect in this 24 hours course. It is also a course that is worth “8 points.” I do not know exactly what this means. In fact, my host came to the first class meeting and discussed the points with the students, and informed them of the number of points they would earn if they completed my course. I was happy to let my host and students deal with the issue of points while I just teach the course.

For the semester, the students will be earning course grades from “1” to “5”, with a “5” being comparable to an “A” in our system. Each week I grade the papers using this point system as well. The students are doing very creditable weekly assignments. Taking into account that the Finnish students as well as the international students in the course are writing in English as a second language, I have been impressed with the level of work they do. It has sometimes meant
more time than usual to read the papers because of their struggles with English, but it is nothing serious, and most of the students write English very well. At the end of the semester I will average their weekly grades to determine their semester grades. I do not expect that any one will get less than a “3” for their course grade.

We were told that university courses do not have the rigid attendance requirements that American colleges and universities often have. Accordingly, I have not take attendance although I do this for my courses back home. Many of the students have work, professional, and travel obligations and may miss a class now and again, but they inform me about this and responsibly get their weekly assignments to me, usually by email. There happens also to be a community of scholars in Helsinki with my research interests, and I have let them know that they are welcome to attend any of my lectures. A few are doing this, coming to one or two lectures that are on topics of particular interest to them.