FISxxxx
THE INFORMATION EXPERIENCE IN CONTEXT
Winter 2009

INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION
Instructor: Dr. Jenna Hartel
Office Hours: TBD
Contact: jenna.hartel@utoronto.ca
Class meeting time: Thursday, 9:00-12:00, January 5 - April 10, 2009

COURSE DESCRIPTION
FISxxxx focuses on identifying and understanding what is “informational” in any setting. Students will
develop sharpened vision to discern informational patterns, that is, an ability to trace what Bates (1999)
calls the “red thread” of information pervading life. A tenet of the course is that information does not
exist in a vacuum but is inextricably bound to a context. An array of factors that compose information
and its context will be examined, including:

• Human behaviours and practices such as seeking, searching, sharing, creating, saving, using, and
  ignoring information
• Historical, cultural, social, and environmental forces that shape and imbue information
• Conceptual structures and technical systems that mediate information, and
• Information itself

This class is designed as a seminar and includes a methods workshop and an original Research Project.
In weeks 1-3, theories, models, and concepts will be introduced from the literature of Information
Seeking and Use (ISU). In weeks 4 and 5, students will learn the fundamentals of ethnographic research.
In weeks 6-9, four Featured Contexts—The Home, The Scientific Laboratory, The Museum, and Serious
Leisure—will be profiled and studied as exemplar information experiences in context. As the semester
unfolds, students will refine their observational and analytical skills through an exploratory,
ethnographic Research Project about the information experience within a context of personal interest or
career relevance.

COURSE OBJECTIVES
To instill an awareness and understanding of the information dimension within human affairs, and to
develop the observational and analytical skills necessary to do so.

LEARNING OUTCOMES
• Awareness of the history and evolution of ISU research in the field of information studies and a
  sense of the future in this research area from an iSchool perspective.
• Familiarity with a sample of major theories, models and concepts pertaining to ISU research and
  some ability to interpret these devices in an iSchool paradigm.
• Understanding of the distinct features of the information experience within the four Featured
• Ability to design and execute a small-scale, exploratory, ethnographic field study that leads to insights on information phenomena.
• Specialized expertise in the information experience within the chosen context of personal interest and an inkling of how to transfer discoveries to professional practice.

INSTRUCTIONAL METHODS
The objectives of the course will be achieved through lectures, guest speakers, field trips, case studies, in-class discussions, readings, and written exercises. A methods workshop and the Research Project provide hands-on experience in ethnographic research methods.

PREREQUISITES & REQUIREMENTS
This is an advanced graduate seminar and suits students who have completed all core courses and are in the latter stages of their studies. Participants should be comfortable with theoretical and methodological discussions and have a passion for conducting original research into information phenomena within a specific population or setting. The course demands considerable initiative, curiosity, and creativity. Doctoral students are welcome.

ASSIGNMENTS
All assignments are due at the beginning of the designated class. Extensions are granted only for medical reasons. Assignments marked with an asterisk (*) below are components of the Research Project and are due in draft form in class to be discussed with an assigned Peer Partner; these will be marked in class as satisfactory/unsatisfactory (S/U). Additional details on assignments are available at the end of the syllabus. The final grade for the course is based on:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model Exercise</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>750 words (Q &amp; A format)</td>
<td>Week 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Information Space Exercise</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>750 words (Q &amp; A format)</td>
<td>Week 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class Engagement</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>various</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
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Note: 250 words equals 1 double-spaced page.

COMMENTS ON GRADING
Evaluation of student work will conform to guidelines found in the University of Toronto Graduate Grading and Evaluation Practices Policy, at: http://www.utoronto.ca/govcncl/pap/policies/grgrade.pdf. According to this source, grades in the A range (A+, A, A-) are defined as being “excellent” and grades in the B range (B+, B, B-) are defined as being “good.” A detailed description of these categories is at: http://www.ischool.utoronto.ca/images/documents/about/fisgradeinterpretations%282%29.pdf.
For the S/U elements of the Research Project: A “satisfactory” is given to a working draft document in narrative or detailed outline form and awards 1 point toward the final Research Project grade. An “unsatisfactory” is given when no working draft document is created and awards 0 points toward the final Research Project grade. A total of 4 points are available towards the final grade of the Research Project by timely completion of the S/U elements.

**ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**
From Acting Dean of the Faculty of Information, Jens-Erik Mai: “The essence of academic life revolves around respect not only for the ideas of others, but also for their rights to those ideas and their promulgation. It is therefore essential that all of us who are engaged in the life of the mind take the utmost care that the ideas and expressions of ideas of other people are always appropriately handled, and, where necessary, cited. When ideas or materials of others are used in writing assignments, they must be cited. Please acquaint yourself with the University of Toronto’s Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters at [http://www.utoronto.ca/govcncl/pap/policies/behaveac.pdf](http://www.utoronto.ca/govcncl/pap/policies/behaveac.pdf)

**COURSE WEBSITE ON SAKAI**
A course website will be maintained on Sakai at [https://sakai.ischool.utoronto.ca/portal](https://sakai.ischool.utoronto.ca/portal). Weekly readings, handouts and other materials will be posted when appropriate. All students should log into Sakai during the first week of classes to be enrolled for important email notices. Technical questions concerning Sakai can be directed to Tasha Caswell at tasha.caswell@utoronto.ca.

**STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY OR HEALTH CONSIDERATION**
Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. If you have a disability or health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach the instructor and/or the Accessibility Services Office at [http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/accessibility.htm](http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/accessibility.htm) as soon as possible. The Accessibility Services staff are available by appointment to assess specific needs, provide referrals, and arrange appropriate accommodations.

**SCHEDULE OF CLASSES & ASSIGNED READINGS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>📝</td>
<td>Assignment Due</td>
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<td>🎙</td>
<td>Guest Lecture or Field Trip</td>
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<td>🔔</td>
<td>Reminder</td>
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<td>🎤</td>
<td>Student Presentation</td>
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<td>🎶</td>
<td>In Class Feedback Session with Peer Partner</td>
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<tr>
<td>[RP]</td>
<td>Pertaining to the Research Project</td>
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The weekly readings, listed below, are available for short term loan at the Inforum or as full text digital documents on the Sakai course website, in the folder entitled Resources (please note that not all readings are available electronically on Sakai).
Week 1 – Introduction to the Information Experience

[RP] Reminder: Consider a topic for your Research Project

Assigned Reading

Week 2 – Metatheories and Foundational Concepts

[RP] Reminder: Consider a topic for your Research Project

[RP] Feedback Session with Peer Partner to brainstorm and refine your topic for the Research Project

Assigned Readings


Week 3 – Models of Information Phenomena

Model Exercise Due

Assigned Readings


And: Select one article from Appendix A of this document for your Model Exercise.

Week 4 – Methods Workshop, Part 1: Introduction to Ethnography

Guest Lecture by Dean Sharpe of the University of Toronto’s Office of Research Ethics

[RP] Reminder: Sign up for a presentation date (Weeks 10-12)
 Assigned Readings


Review the website of the University of Toronto’s Office of Research Ethics at http://www.research.utoronto.ca/ethics/e_human.html


Week 5 – Methods Workshop, Part 2: Ethnographic Field Methods

 Assigned Readings


Hartel, J. (unpublished manuscript). Pictures worth a thousand words: A visual approach to the study of libraries in the home.


Week 6 – Featured Context: The Home

Assigned Readings

Personal Information Space Exercise Due


**Week 7 – Featured Context: The Scientific Laboratory**

- **Observational field trip to a science lab**

**Assigned Readings**


Additional readings TBD.

**Week 8 – Featured Context: The Museum**

- **Guest Lecture and/or Field Trip**
- [RP] Literature Review draft due in class
- [RP] Feedback Session with Peer Partner to discuss Literature Review

**Assigned Readings**


Week 9 – Featured Context: Serious Leisure

[RP] Research Design Draft due in class
[RP] Feedback Session with Peer Partner to discuss Research Design

Assigned Readings


Week 10 – Student Presentations of Information Experiences in Context

[RP] Student Presentations
No Assigned Readings, work on your research

Week 11 – Student Presentations of Information Experiences in Context

[RP] Student Presentations
[RP] Field Data Draft due in class
Feedback Session with Peer Partner to discuss Field Data
No Assigned Readings, work on your research

Week 12 – Student Presentations of Information Experiences in Context

[RP] Student Presentations
No Assigned Readings, work on your research

Week 13 – Conclusion and Discussion: Are there any Universal Insights?

[RP] Final Paper (all elements synthesized) Due in Class

Assigned Readings TBD
ASSIGNMENTS

An overview of assignments and grading policies appears on pages 2-3 of this syllabus. Specific assignments are described in detail below.

MODEL EXERCISE
Value: 15%
Due: Week 3
Requirement: 750 word paper, following the Q & A format provided below

The predominant way to represent what is known about an information experience is a model. The objective of this assignment is to analyze one such model. Appendix 1 contains a list of articles that feature models of the information experience. Select an article from the list and carefully read it. (Note: you may want to select a model that is related to your Research Project; see the instructor for guidance if necessary. Other models/articles can be used with the instructor’s permission).

Answer the questions below; cut and paste the questions to a Word document and highlight the questions in bold. Make your response per question succinct and no longer than a paragraph—do not exceed the 750 word limit. Be prepared to discuss your discoveries and insights during class.

Questions
1. What is the name of the model you are studying? (If no name is provided, invent one)
2. What population, scenario and/or context does it represent?
3. In what metatheoretical perspective is it grounded? (See Week 2 reading by Bates for choices of metatheoretical perspectives). Provide some evidence of this metatheory.
4. How was this model developed? What research is it based upon?
5. What are the central elements represented in the model? Describe each.
6. What does it display about the information experience?
7. Critique the model: What are its shortcomings, limitations or assumptions?

Grading Criteria

- Depth of understanding and insight into the model.
- Fluency in concepts and terms used in the class and readings to date.
- Writing quality, style and clarity.

PERSONAL INFORMATION SPACE EXERCISE
Value: 15%
Due: Week 6
Requirement: 750 word paper, following the Q & A format provided below

We all live and work within one (or more) personalized information spaces that may exist in traditional documentary (i.e. paper), digital, or hybrid forms. The objective of this assignment is to examine one of your own personal information spaces.

Identify an information-based space, system, or environment within your life (examples are listed below) for study. Using the ethnographic perspective and data gathering methods introduced in Weeks 4-5,
analyze and document the space. Then, answer the questions below; cut and paste the questions to a Word document and highlight the questions in bold. Make your response per question succinct and no longer than a paragraph—do not exceed the 750 word limit. Be prepared to discuss your discoveries and insights during class. This exercise is meant to serve as practice for the fieldwork component of your Research Project.

**Example Spaces**

- Financial record keeping system
- Academic project
- Hobby related information (i.e. photo or recipe collection)
- Email account
- Personal computer desktop

**Questions**

1. How would you name or title the space you are studying?
2. What role does it play in your life, or what purpose does it serve?
3. How does it work? (Use models, sketches, photographs as necessary)
   You may want to include a discussion of:
   - main components
   - acquisition/management/weeding
   - organization or classification scheme
   - access/privacy

4. Select one concept presented in lecture and/or readings thus far and relate your space to this concept.

**Grading Criteria**

- Depth of understanding and insight into the system.
- Effective use of ethnographic methods.
- Fluency in concepts and terms used in the class and readings to date.
- Writing quality, style and clarity.

**Research Project**

Value: 50%
Due: Contains multiple components due in draft form in Weeks 4, 8, 9 and 11 and a final paper due Week 13.
Requirement: Varies per component. Upon completion, a 2000 word paper and 15 minute class presentation.

The Research Project is an opportunity to study an information experience first-hand and in-depth, and to practice ethnographic research methods. The assignment will result in a 2000 word paper due Week 13, and a class presentation. The main components of the project (listed below and marked with asterisks) are due as individual parts in draft form in class on Weeks 4, 8, 9, and 11, respectively. These will be marked Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory. Time will be provided in class to discuss the drafts with a Peer Partner. The components of the Research Project are outlined below.
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A. Topic Statement
Value: S/U – 1 point
Due: Week 4 in draft form
Requirement: 250 words

Select an information experience in context that is of personal interest or relevance to your career, or that is an interest outside of your studies and work. Topics cannot be general, such as “Google,” or “teenagers.” Rather, topics should entail an information context that includes information phenomena, a person (or people), and an activity, such as:

- First-year humanities students executing a term paper
- Parents of newborn babies
- Newly landed immigrants to Toronto entering university
- Participants in a yoga class
- A person who has just experienced ‘love at first sight’
- Someone launching a weight loss diet
- Employees who manage the stacks of a local bookstore
- A person putting their house on the market

Time will be provided during class Week 2 to brainstorm and refine ideas with your Peer Partner. You may consult with the instructor on topics if necessary during office hours.

For the topic statement, provide the following:

- A definition and description of the person or population
- A definition and description of the context
- The metatheoretical perspective that frames your inquiry
- The information phenomena of interest – it is important to narrow the range of what will be examined. Express your focus in 1-3 general questions
- 3-5 citations to articles that are relevant to the topic

B. Literature Review
Value: S/U – 1 point
Due: Week 8
Requirement: 500-750 words
Building upon your topic statement, survey the literature and write a literature review that provides background and framing. The literature review should chronicle what is already known about the information phenomena for this population and/or context. It may be that few articles speak directly to your topic; if so, find creative links to existing research through inference. Draw primarily from the information seeking and use literature, with secondary use of materials in other social sciences (i.e. sociology, psychology, communications).

**C. Research Design**
Value: S/U – 1 point
Due: Week 9
Requirement: 250-500 words

Utilizing readings and the Week 4-5 methods workshop, create a research design for a small-scale, exploratory, ethnographic field study. For the purposes of this assignment, the research design outlines *what you will do* to answer your research questions or to learn more about your topic. *Do not attempt to design a grand research project! The inquiry must be focused and entail 3-6 hours of fieldwork. The research design should outline:*

- The fieldwork setting and an access plan
- Data gathering techniques (i.e. application of one or more of the following: interviews, participant observation, field notes, photographic inventory)
- Process for handling data (captioning, transcription, etc.)
- General approach to analysis (analysis options will be discussed in prior classes)

**D. Field Data**
Value: S/U – 1 point
Due: Week 11
Requirement: various

Once executed, your research design will result in field data of different forms (e.g. field notes, memos, sketches, photographs, interview transcripts, etc.). Process and organize these materials into a form that is useful for further analysis and dissemination. Some preliminary analysis may be expressed at this point in the way you organize and display the data.

**E. Findings (plus Introduction)/Final Paper**
Value: 50%
Due: Week 13
Requirement: 2000 word paper

Utilize the field data to answer the questions posed in your topic statement. Your findings should provide a rich description of the information experience in context. A key part of this stage is to bring conceptual order to your data through themes, a narrative, and/or models. Ethnographic writing should be lively! You may have more data and insights than necessary. In this case, winnow and refine your insights. When your findings are fully developed, create an introduction that frames and integrates all the components of the Research Project and then finish with a summarizing conclusion. Your complete Research Project submitted Week 13 should be an integrated, polished document.

**F. Class Presentation**
Value: 10%
Due: Weeks 10-12 (Sign-up for a presentation date will occur in class Week 4)
Requirement: 15 minutes

Present the highlights of your Research Project to the class utilizing handouts, PowerPoint, and/or original data. The presentation should run for 15 minutes, with 5 minutes for Q & A. Presentations will be timed and kept on schedule. If your project is still underway, present your research design and discoveries to date.

Grading Criteria for final paper and presentation

- Extent to which an information experience has been identified and framed for study
- Use of existing literature on your topic
- Application of ethnographic field methods
- Clarity, depth, and engaging delivery of findings

Grading criteria for S/U elements (4)

- A “satisfactory” is given to working draft document in narrative or detailed outline form and earns 1 point toward the final Research Project grade.
- A “unsatisfactory” is designated when no working draft document is created and earns 0 points toward the final Research Project grade.
- A total of 4 points are available towards the final grade of the Research Project by timely completion of the S/U elements.

CLASS ENGAGEMENT
Value: 10%
Due: Throughout term

This is an advanced graduate seminar and class engagement is important. All participants are expected to come to class prepared to discuss the topic and readings. Students will also sign up to lead a discussion on one of the assigned readings on the syllabus, and to work collaboratively with a Peer Partner.

APPENDIX 1: ARTICLE CHOICES FOR MODEL EXERCISE

Seminal Models


**More Recent Models**


**See Professor Hartel if you would like to use a different model/paper.**