

# Applying Grounded Theory Methods to Library and User Assessment

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## Introduction

While grounded theory methods are most often used in the way their name implies (i.e., to develop theory) they can also be used for more applied research and assessment problems related to libraries, their users, and uses of them. This workshop will begin with a brief discussion of the ways in which grounded theory methods might be applied to library assessment problems. It will continue by reviewing several of the core grounded theory methods, including the role of sensitizing concepts, simultaneous data collection and analysis, sources of data, identifying and recruiting an initial sample, coding, constant comparative method of analysis, memo writing, theoretical sampling, and integrating and presenting results. Several of these discussions will be accompanied by hands-on exercises, e.g., in observation, coding, and memo writing. The workshop will conclude by revisiting the issues associated with applying grounded theory methods to library and user/use assessment.

## Background and objectives

In 1965, Glaser and Strauss published their text, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Since then, grounded theory methods have developed much further and are often applied in library and information science research (a search of *Library & Information Science Abstracts* yields 211 papers with the phrase, grounded theory, in their titles or abstracts). Even so, few of these papers are studies that have fully applied the methods described in the standard texts on grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). One possible explanation is that researchers are not completely familiar with the full range of methods to be incorporated in the development of grounded theory, and how those methods fit together as the study is carried out. This workshop will expose the participants to the range of methods used in the development of grounded theory. In particular, it will focus on how these methods can be applied to the goals of both theory development and library and user assessment.

## The learning objectives

Those completing the workshop will be able to:

- Recognize situations in which grounded theory methods would be useful;
- Design a study using grounded theory methods;
- Select particular methods to apply in a particular study, and make valid decisions about which methods not to apply in a particular study; and
- Carry out a basic study using some or all of the methods discussed.

## Topics and method

Some grounded theory methods are more challenging to apply than others; special attention will be paid to those that present particular challenges and are relatively unique to grounded theory methods (as compared with other qualitative approaches). The teaching method to be used will be primarily lecture and discussion, with several hands-on exercises used to solidify participants' learning. The topics of discussion will include:

- Alignment of applied research problems with a theoretical emphasis: Two types of research goals will be discussed: library or user/use assessment goals and theory development goals. Grounded theory methods were developed to fulfill the purpose of theory development, and so there is some question about whether they can be used to address more applied research questions. In small groups, participants will work with both these types of research problems.
- Sensitizing concepts: The role of previously-defined theoretical concepts (as identified through a literature review) in grounded theory studies is contested. Some researchers recommend that no literature review be conducted until near the end or after the study is completed; others argue that concepts may be identified but should be set aside during the data collection and analysis phases. The impact of different approaches to handling sensitizing concepts will be discussed, with examples.

- Simultaneous data collection and analysis: The constant comparative method of data analysis (see below) requires that data be analyzed as it's being collected. The logistics of this approach will be briefly discussed.
- Data sources: Interviews and direct observation are the most frequently-used sources of data in grounded theory studies. During the workshop, interviews will be briefly discussed and participants will participate in an observation exercise. They will conduct observations of particular items/aspects of the workshop space (including the other participants). They will then share these observations, and provide suggestions to each other about improving their observation skills.
- The initial sample: For a grounded theory study, the researcher should seek data where it is most likely to be found. Developing an initial sampling plan will be discussed.
- Inducing codes and categories from the data: Grounded theory studies rely heavily on open coding, including in vivo coding. Some practice in these techniques will be provided through a coding exercise. Participants will code some interview data provided by the workshop leader. They will then share and discuss their codes in small groups, illustrating how each researcher's creativity comes into play during the analysis process.
- The constant comparative method of analysis: One of the hallmarks of the grounded theory methodology is the constant comparison of findings, across data (i.e., interview transcripts, observation notes, etc.), codes assigned to particular data points, and categories derived through analysis of the codes.
- Memo writing: Memos are used to elaborate and define categories and, in particular, support the creative role of the researcher. Based on the data coded during the previous exercise and the codes generated for it, participants will write a brief early-analysis memo. They will share their memos in small groups and provide feedback to each other about ways to further improve the memos or directions for additional memos.
- Theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation: Based on the findings from the initial sample, the researcher will expand the data set through theoretical sampling. This approach will be discussed, along with issues related to reaching theoretical saturation.
- Integrating and presenting the findings: Through the methods discussed in the workshop, researchers will draw conclusions and be ready to present them to others. Approaches to this final stage will be discussed, along with ways to evaluate the trustworthiness of the conclusions drawn. The workshop will conclude with a discussion of the ways in which existing theories can be expanded or specialized (Vakkari & Kuokkanen, 1997). In addition, we will revisit the issues associated with applying these methods to library and user/use assessment.

## **The target audience**

Two types of participants will find this workshop useful. The first is doctoral students or junior faculty members who are interested in applying grounded theory methods; this group may also include more senior scholars who have not yet applied grounded theory methods in their work. The second is information professionals who are interested in applying grounded theory methods to questions of library use and users in their professional settings. Many of the LiDA attendees may fall into both of these groups, and the workshop will be doubly useful for them.

The workshop will be presented at a relatively introductory level, requiring little prior knowledge of grounded theory methods. It will be expected that attendees have some familiarity with interpretive research approaches and qualitative methods, generally.

**Keywords: grounded theory, research methodology**

## **REFERENCES**

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- Vakkari, P., & Kuokkanen, M. (1997). Theory growth in information science: Applications of the theory of science to a theory of information seeking. *Journal of Documentation*, 53(5), 497-519.

## **Curriculum Vitae**

Dr. Barbara Wildemuth is Professor and Associate Dean in the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (USA). She is the author of the monograph, *Applications of Social Research Methods to Questions in Information and Library Science* (2009). She regularly teaches a doctoral seminar in theory development, which includes in-depth discussion of grounded theory methods.