

Glasgow School of Art Course Specification

Course Title: An Introduction to Design Ethnography

Please note that this course specification is correct on the date of publication but may be subject to amendment prior to the start of the 2026-27 Academic Year.

Course Code:	HECOS Code:	Academic Session:
PELC249		2026-27

1. Course Title:
An Introduction to Design Ethnography

2. Date of Approval:	3. Lead School:	4. Other Schools:
PACAAG April 2022	School of Innovation and Technology	This course is available to students on PGT programmes which include a Stage 2 elective.

5. Credits:	6. SCQF Level:	7. Course Leader:
20	11	Dr Mafalda Moreira

8. Associated Programmes:
This course is available to students on PGT programmes which include a Stage 2 elective.

9. When Taught:
Stage 2, Taught online only

10. Course Aims:
The overarching aims of the stage 2 electives are as follows: • Encourage interdisciplinary, critical reflexivity from within an open set of choices; • Foster deep investigative approaches to new or unfamiliar areas of practice and theory; • Cultivate self-directed leadership and initiative-taking in both applied and abstract modes of practice/ study not necessarily associated with a student's particular creative specialism; • Enable flexible, ethical exploration and connection of diverse knowledge and understanding within a specialist programme of study. This course introduces creative practitioners to the main concepts of design ethnography (applied in a variety of disciplinary contexts), as a postmodern variation upon the Anthropological tradition, and looks at the theoretical and historical foundations of user centred research and how it relates to societies, cultures, and design. Students in this course will apply these theoretical tools in practice through short field exercises focused on key research skills within the larger context of cultural engagement and a nuanced appreciation of social, cultural and subjective manifestations of difference.

In alignment with the above Stage 2 aims, this course aims to:

- Provide students with a variety of fundamental research concepts and methods that are equally useful across a range of fields of postgraduate study;
- Introduce students to the fundamentals of ethnographic research as part of an Anthropological disciplinary tradition;
- Highlight the core principles, history, and terminology of cultural, ethnographic, and user-centred research, and their historical and theoretical derivation;
- Convey the value and use of qualitative and quantitative data when referencing epistemological frames of reference, and how these are applied to user centred research into specific socio-cultural phenomena;
- Help students to acquire techniques and 'best practices' for analysing and critiquing research, fieldwork, and collaborative endeavours, including the role of ethics in user centred research, recruiting techniques, interviews, observational frameworks, and field notes; techniques;
- Communicate the importance of reflective practice as an ethical standpoint within the field of ethnographic research, and the techniques and skills used by a reflective practitioner.

11. Intended Learning Outcomes of Course:

By the end of this course students will be able to:

- Use a range of research methods within the framework of design anthropology and ethnographic fieldwork.
- Understand and apply the theoretical concepts underpinning the tools, techniques, and methods used in ethnographic research.
- Evidence and present the value of research decisions in relation to a given research challenge and its cultural context.
- Understand the role of the creative reflective practitioner (how to manage bias and acknowledge difference) in user centred research.
- Demonstrate understanding of the relationships between research and practice;

12. Indicative Content:

The course content is designed to develop an understanding of the research skills used in user experience design and design ethnography through engagement with a user-centred research project and supported by related seminars and specific expertise.

The course will cover:

- Techniques used within the field of "design ethnography" by creative practitioners
- Approaches for working as a user-centred researcher within a creative project or specific milieu
- The application of specific research tools and processes in research fieldwork and the generation of research findings
- Identifying and deploying appropriate methods of communication both within fieldwork and to a diverse range of stakeholders
- The role of ethics, empathy, humility, difference and respect when conducting design research.

13. Description of Summative Assessment Methods:

Assessment Method	Description of Assessment Method	Weight %	Submission week (assignments)
Research Project	Research project with appropriate documentation (Field Notes, Reflective Summaries, and Group-Based Analysis Report (1000-1500 words) including bibliography and references	80%	Week 11, Stage 2
Presentation	Final Presentation	20%	Week 11, Stage 2
Or			
Essay	3500 word written essay (this should include examples of visual work, where appropriate, with a bibliography)	100	Week 11, Stage 2

13.1 Please describe the Summative Assessment arrangements:

Students on this course will be assessed on their ability to:

- Conceptualise and present a research problem
- Utilise appropriate methods and tools when conducting a research project
- Situate their projects within a research context;
- Demonstrate a level of depth in the analysis of works, practitioners, ideas and/or debates appropriate to PGT level.
- Communicate verbally and in written/visual format the results of a user-centred researcher engagement within a specific research initiative and socio-political or theoretical context
- Produce documentation of a professional level reflecting on their process, intent and learning through engagement with the course (including an understanding of the cultural differences amongst the “users” engaged with).

The percentage breakdown of the assessment will be as follows:

- 80% of mark based on a research project with appropriate field notes and a 1000-1500 word group-based written analysis. This should include both a bibliography and references.
- 20% of mark based on a final group-based project presentation.

OR

- A 3500 word written essay (this should include examples of visual work, where appropriate, with a bibliography and references).

For this course, assessment of student work will consist of:

- An assessment of the project content and evidenced value of the research conducted (seen through tutorial sessions, research data collected, and final oral or written presentations)
- An assessment of the presentation itself, it’s level of communication and its appropriateness to stakeholders in question
- An assessment of the reflective PPJ (Project Process Journal), its intent, reflection, and analysis of the students engagement with the course and value to the individual students growth as a user-centred researcher.

14. Description of Formative Assessment Methods:

Engagement with formative assessment is a mandatory requirement. Formative assessment and feedback will be conducted near to week 5 of the course, and is provided through defined online tutorial discussion and feedback throughout the course duration.

14.1 Please describe the Formative Assessment arrangements:

- Students will receive supervisory support in the form of online group tutorials. In addition, students will be required to attend online group sessions (peer-assisted learning (PAL) groups).
- Tutorial notes will be recorded by a tutorial buddy for review and discussion between the students involved in the tutorial.
- Peer review and feedback will also be used during online presentations to provide additional formative feedback and to encourage discussion concerning the development of critical sensibilities relating to the practice of user-centred and ethnographic research.

15. Learning and Teaching Methods:

Formal Contact Hours	Notional Learning Hours
20	200

15.1 Description of Teaching and Learning Methods:

The teaching on this course takes the following formats:

- Project definition (seminars, brief writing and tutorials)
- Project enactment (Interim presentations and tutorials)
- Project presentation (Tutor and peer feedback)
- Analysis and Field Note writing (Tutorials)

Classes take place online on Wednesdays or Fridays in Semester 2 and teaching sessions follow the structure.

16. Pre-requisites:

Successful completion of PGT Stage 1

17. Can this course be taken by Exchange/Study Abroad students?	Yes
18. Are all the students on the course taught wholly by distance learning?	Yes
19. Does this course represent a work placement or a year of study abroad?	No
20. Is this course collaborative with any other institutions?	No
20.1 If yes, then please enter the names of the other teaching institutions:	
N/A	

21. Additional Relevant Information:

GSA operates a Research-based ethics approval policy and guidelines for PGT– postgraduate taught programmes – oblige students to work within areas of practice that necessitate an acquaintance with the Institutional and Professional application of research ethics. This course develops the application of an ethical research practice through a dialogue with the PGT Ethical Guidelines for students. In addition to a Research Seminar upon Ethical Practice students will be enabled to conduct a research project developed within the auspices of the current GSA PGT Ethics guidelines.

22. Indicative Bibliography:

- Barnard, A. (2000), *History and Theory in Anthropology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wilson, W. J. & Chaddh, A. (2008), *The Role of Theory in Ethnographic Research*, Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Kuniavsky, M. (2003), *Observing the User Experience*, London: Morgan Kaufmann.
- Illich, I. (2001), *Tools for Conviviality*, London: Marion Boyars.
- Emerson, R. M., Fretx, R. I. & Shaw, L. L. (1995), *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wolcott, H, F. (2001), *The Art of Fieldwork*, Oxford: Altamira Press
- Illich I. (2001), *Tools for Conviviality*, London: Marion Boyars.
- Emerson, R. M., Fretx, R. I. & Shaw, L. L. (1995), *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hammersley, M. & Atkinson, P. (2007), *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, London: Routledge.
- Van Willigen, J. & Kedia S. (2002), *Applied Anthropology: domains of application*, London: Bergin & Garvey.