Students as Ethnographers: Guiding Alternative Research Projects

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Fieldwork involves the disciplined study of what the world is like to people who have learned to see, hear, speak, think and act in ways that are different. Rather than studying people, ethnography means learning from people.

James Spradley

Students are continually navigating the multiple worlds of home, peer group, school, and workplace, as well as the virtual worlds of the media, computer games, Web sites, Internet chat rooms, or literary texts. Learning to participate in each of these worlds requires that students learn which social practices are valued. Because social practices valued in one world may not be valued in others, students must learn to switch their expectations for appropriate behavior across different worlds. For example, students who are members of honors choir are expected to dress, talk, and even walk across the stage in a particular manner. Those same students may need to change “costumes” and “scripts” when they prepare for the state soccer championship or in their work as order clerks at McDonald’s.

Students learn to observe cues and reactions suggesting which social practices are valued in a social world or context. For example, when they enter a new English class at the beginning of the year, they notice that the teacher values students who respond quickly to questions. They also notice that their peer group resists cooperating with this rapid-fire reaction to questions by deliberately not responding or delaying their responses. Because they value their identity as loyal peer group members over that of being “good students” within that class, they choose not to respond to the teacher’s questions. Their insights all stem from their perceptions of the world of a teacher-controlled classroom and the world of their peer group.

When students have difficulty reading or interpreting an unfamiliar world, they may judge that world negatively or refuse to actively participate. Likewise, when students enter into the often unfamiliar terrain of text worlds in literature and have difficulty constructing those worlds, they may judge the reading as “stupid” or “boring.” All of this points to the importance of helping students learn to interpret how the meanings of social practices are constituted by certain cultural norms operating in real and text worlds.

One approach to helping students learn to interpret these worlds is by having them conduct micro-ethnographic research projects. In these projects, students study how participants construct the meanings of social practices in the worlds of school, home, peer group, neighborhood, sports team, community group, workplace, or various virtual worlds. We describe these projects as micro-ethnographic studies to imply that, in contrast to the usual ethnographic research project, they focus on specific groups, sites, or institutions for a relatively short period of time. The teacher’s role is to
provide a framework for conducting inquiry into social worlds.

**Overview of Research Procedures**

1. Read and discuss sample studies.
   - Learn how to conduct research.
   - Examine how social identities are shaped by cultural forces and attitudes.
   - Embrace an open-mindedness for cultural diversity.
2. Select topic for research.
   - Discuss social and ethical implications of studying any group.
   - Address issues of safety and need for informed consent.
3. Pose research questions.
4. Gain entry to the group through a cultural broker.
5. Become a participant observer.
6. Collect artifacts and write field notes.
7. Conduct ethnographic interviews.
8. Analyze field notes, artifacts, and interviews.
9. Draft and produce a report.
   - Write narrative reports, create documentaries, and/or prepare multi-media presentations.
10. Reflect on experiences as researchers.
    - Recognize the ways in which one’s own identity is shaped by cultural forces.
    - Uncover how one’s own beliefs, practices, and prejudices are shaped through peer allegiances.

**Adopting a Cultural Perspective**

In doing this research, students learn to adopt a cultural perspective by perceiving social practices as shaped by the culture of a particular social world. According to Edgar Schein, these practices include:

- sharing a common language and conceptual categories
- defining norms and boundaries for appropriate interpersonal behavior
- recruiting, selecting, socializing, and training members
- allocating authority, power, status, and resources
- dispensing rewards and punishments
- coping with unpredictable, stressful events

Schein notes that these practices are evident at three levels: artifacts, values, and assumptions/paradigms. Examining artifacts (objects, documents, or visible behaviors) allows one to gain understanding of the cultural attitudes and assumptions. Schein cites the example of a workplace in which the doors to offices are always open and in which there is a lot of discussion and argument, behaviors that reflect an “open” culture. In any culture, members cite certain values to justify their behavior. The head of the workplace will order the doors to be open because communication is highly valued. Less visible are the underlying assumptions or paradigms that members take for granted; for example, the assumption that members in the workplace need to test out their ideas with others in the group.

Students can begin to see a social world by noting infractions or violations of conventions or norms. If assumptions of appropriate behaviors are ignored or violated, then participants are reprimanded or adopt alternative practices. Even a shopping mall can be considered a social world that comes complete with cultural attitudes. For

**Ethnographic Studies of Response to Media**


example, security officials in shopping malls may discipline adolescents who behave in ways that challenge or resist the controlled decorum.

Within a social world, participants learn to use specific speech acts such as requesting, informing, praising, describing, or inviting to achieve specific goals. In placing orders in fast-food restaurants, customers simply state their requests in a shorthand manner, as in “Big Mac, fries, Coke, to go.” Contrast this talk with the more elaborate process of ordering in the social world of an expensive restaurant.

Once students begin to understand the idea of how social practices serve to construct a social world, they can discuss the kinds of practices typically operating in that world. Within the activity of sports recruiting, for instance, recruiters employ a range of practices: identifying players’ strengths and weaknesses, predicting players’ potential development, impressing prospective players, representing their schools, and serving as mentors or guides. A recruiter uses the practices of praising a player’s skill and predicting potential success on a team for the specific purpose of gaining that player’s support.

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Understanding a social world as a microculture also requires students to adopt the perspective of an “outsider” or Martian, who begins to perceive their familiar world as suddenly strange. Students practice adopting this Martian perspective by going out as teams to different restaurants, stores, athletic events, classrooms, and ceremonies and recording their observations of peoples’ behavior, language, and appearance. They are then asked to interpret the meaning of these phenomena as if they were alien strangers who had no prior knowledge to explain people’s behavior. For example, in observing fast food restaurants, they may wonder why everybody is often hurrying or why the chairs are not very comfortable. Then, in trying to develop an explanation for behavior, students must begin to define norms and conventions that constitute appropriate behavior for a group or institution.

Read and Discuss Sample Studies

To gain an understanding of how others have conducted ethnographic studies, students read some sample ethnographic reports. It is important to state again that these methods do not represent the kinds of ethnographic approaches employed in anthropological research. Actual ethnographic research requires extensive prior training and long periods of time studying a specific site, so the use of the word “ethnography” needs to be qualified in the context of conducting this research. Students could read about qualitative and ethnographic research methods in two relatively accessible books: Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater and Bonnie Sunstein’s,

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Field Working: Reading and Writing Research (Blair Press, 1997) and Corrine Glesne and Alan Peshkin’s, Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction (Addison-Wesley, 1998).

Unfortunately, most of the published ethnographies may be beyond the grasp of middle and high school students. Sections of Eckert’s Jocks and Burnouts, portraying tensions between students from middle-class versus working-class homes in a suburban Detroit high school, and Finders’ Just Girls, examining the lives of two early adolescent female groups, may serve as examples. Students could also view documentaries that represent studies of particular cultural sites or institutions. The PBS documentary, Hoop Dreams, provides a complex portrait of the experiences of two African American high school basketball players over a four-year period. The two students, Arthur Agee and William Gates, who live in the same inner-city Chicago neighborhood, are both recruited as ninth graders to play for a suburban Catholic high school, St. Joseph’s.

In responding to Hoop Dreams, students can discuss how certain practices are valued in the different worlds of an inner city Chicago neighborhood and school and a suburban school, as well as in the highly competitive world of high school basketball. In his second year, Arthur has difficulty with his work and, because he is not receiving a full scholarship, leaves the school and plays for his own neighborhood high school, Marshall. In his senior year, he leads his team to the city championship and the state finals, in which they lose the first game. He is then recruited to play for a junior college in Arkansas. For Arthur, the practice of playing basketball in the hopes of making it to the NBA is far more important than school work. In contrast, William starts on the varsity team as a ninth grader and does receive financial support to attend St. Joseph’s for the four-year period. However, he injures his knee in his junior year and never regains his previous high level of playing ability. He is eventually recruited to attend Marquette University and does play on their team. In contrast to Arthur, he begins to recognize that his studies and personal life (he is married and has a child) are just as important as basketball.

One advantage of conducting school ethnographies is that pupils have ready access to various school sites such as the cafeteria, classrooms, and sports events during the school day. (See list of published school ethnographies.) For example, students may study participation in the school prom as a cultural event. In conducting these ethnographies, it is important that students question any stereotypical concepts of peer groups in the school. In working with middle school students at a court-ordered middle school for youthful offenders, the thought occurred to us that studying peer groups might result in passing negative judgments and reinforcing negative stereotypes. For this reason, students were asked to conduct studies of adolescents in various textual and/or virtual worlds. Students investigated adolescent worlds as portrayed on a particular television show or in an adolescent novel.

Select a Topic for Research

Once students are familiar with the idea of studying the culture of a social world, they can conduct their studies. In making their selection, it is important that they have easy, sustained access to the site. Our college students have studied sites such as a three-day country-western festival, a tattoo parlor, a coffee shop, a parent-education organization, and an African American church choir.

One advantage of conducting school ethnographies is that pupils have ready access to various school sites such as the cafeteria, classrooms, and sports events during the school day. (See list of published school ethnographies.) For example, one of the students conducted a study of a group of females meeting weekly to respond to the television programs Beverly Hills 90210 and Melrose Place. Another student examined a fan club’s Internet response to The X-Files, focusing on the conventions for appropriate ways of sharing responses.
If students are engaged in extensive observations and interviews with a selected group of participants, they should develop an informed consent form to be signed by the participants in their study. This form stipulates that participants will not be placed at risk in any way, that they can withdraw from the study at any time, that they will not be identified by name, that their confidentiality will be protected, and that field notes or interview tapes referring to them will be destroyed after the completion of the study. By granting their informed consent, participants are more likely to cooperate in a study knowing that their confidentiality will be protected.

**Pose Research Questions**

To frame their studies, students generate questions about their topic and then select those questions that most intrigue them. For example, a group of students at Blaine High School in Blaine, Minnesota, decided to study a local comedy club. They developed a set of questions that guided decisions about the focus of their observations of the club and their interview questions. They were particularly interested in the performers’ selection of material.

In another project, Margaret asked her middle school students, “How do popular magazines construct appropriate behaviors for teenage boys and girls?” Using *Sports Illustrated* and *Sassy*, the students began reading these magazines from a cultural perspective, asking the following questions: What is seen and not seen in each? What are the cultural categories for each? What is the appropriate turf for males and females? What do the text and images say about what should be regarded as “ordinary”?

**Gain Entry to the Group**

In order to successfully gain entry and begin to conduct a micro ethnographic study, students need to locate a “cultural broker,” a reliable, helpful contact person or member of the group or institution who is known to the students, who helps them gain access to a particular group or institution, and who provides them with an “inside” perspective. To gain access to the comedy club, for instance, the Blaine High School students worked with a “cultural broker” who was an actor in the club as well as a teacher in their school. This person provided the students with an insider’s, behind-the-scenes perspective on his work at the comedy club.

**Become a Participant Observer**

In these ethnographic studies, students often assume the dual role of being both an active participant and an outside observer. For example, one of the students, an avid country-western music fan, studied a three-day country-western music festival, *We Fest*. As a participant in this festival, she described her own reactions to the various performers and to the thousands of people attending the festival. At the same time, in order to gain some perspective on the event as a cultural world, she adopted the stance of an outside observer. She reflected on her own and other participants’ beliefs and attitudes as expressed in interviews. From this reflection, she recognized the limitations of her own stereotypical preconceptions regarding country-western music fans.

In adopting the dual roles of participant observer, students need to sort out the differences in their perspectives. As “fish in water,” they may have difficulty achieving a cultural distance in order to “make the familiar strange” as Erickson says. Even if they can achieve some distance, they may not want to publicly acknowledge tensions between themselves and the subject of their research—for example, other peer groups in their school. They may also assume that in assigning these studies, teachers have a hidden agenda of attempting to change students’ attitudes regarding their behaviors in certain groups. All of this reflects a concern with passing judgment on their peers’ behaviors and attitudes. Given these concerns, teachers need to stress that students should be primarily concerned with describing their peers’ behaviors, not passing judgment on their worth or value.

**Collect Artifacts and Write Field Notes**

As students are observing behaviors and talk, they use field notes to record their observations of the particulars of dress, hairstyle, gestures, social interaction, routines, and ritualistic behaviors. Teachers may want to model strategies by taking a class down to the lunchroom and openly talking about their own strategies for taking field notes of the observed behaviors there.
Students may also observe specific events involving group members, recording members’ use of conversation within those events. For example, a group is meeting at lunchtime to discuss plans for next Friday night. Some group members want to go to a rock concert, while others want to go to a school dance. Those who want to go to the rock concert call those who want to go to the school dance “wimps,” noting that “nobody who’s cool goes to school dances.” Those who want to go to the dance counter that the band at the concert plays primarily for “teeny-boppers,” and that they’re “too old for that kind of music.”

In describing these phenomena, instead of vague, evaluative comments such as “friendly,” “outgoing,” “nice,” “wonderful,” “pleasant,” or abstract summaries, students need to use concrete descriptions of behaviors or appearances. They also record the time of day and the beginning and end of certain activities in the margins—the fact that people move from one activity to the next. For example, specific members eating separately in the lunchroom may later all congregate together in the commons area.

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Students use tape recorders to record talk in a context, or, if recorders are obtrusive or a violation of participants’ privacy, they could record the talk on laptops or in longhand. One advantage of conducting these studies in the school is that students can do their research during the school day by observing peers in the same or other classrooms; for example, they can study the ways in which students and teachers converse with each other in different classes.

In studying any site, students can analyze which participants do or do not talk and for how long, what topics are discussed, the types of speech acts employed (requesting, questioning, asserting, ordering, criticizing), the style or register of the talk (informal, formal, rehearsed, spontaneous). They can also identify certain typical speech genres or consistent patterns of talk accompanied by differing gestures, volume, and appropriate movements.

Students may also conduct interviews with participants, recording in writing or with a tape recorder their perceptions of their own and others’ behavior. They may develop a set of questions regarding the history and meaning of social practices in that site. They may ask participants to describe their thoughts and feelings about specific observed behaviors, artifacts, photos, graphs, or maps. In addition to drawing on predetermined questions that move from fact to opinion or easy to hard questions, students also pose follow-up questions designed to encourage participants to further elaborate, extend, explain, or reflect on their initial responses, using eye contact and restatements to create a relaxed, conversational relationship with the participant.

**Analyze Field Notes, Artifacts, and Interviews**

Using a “dual-entry” journal format, students can record specific behaviors or conversations on one side of their notes and then on the other side reflect on the meaning of these behaviors or conversations. (See Figure 1.)

Students then use their field notes to infer how, within a particular social world, specific behaviors represent social practices such as defining social identities, building relationships, constructing group stances, coping with conflicts or differences, constructing knowledge, and creating imagined alternative roles and stances (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw; Jackson and Ives). When we ask students to write about the experiences in different social worlds, we want them to do more than simply describe their experiences in and perceptions of the culture of, for example, the shopping mall as a consumer fantasy land. We also want them to examine how these social worlds are constructed by various political and ideological forces with their own competing agendas. Having to grapple with their own alignments with and membership in these different...
worlds stimulates students to think critically about their own beliefs and attitudes.

In such reflections, they are defining consistent patterns in the observed behavior that suggest certain attitudes. For example, in reflecting on the debate over plans for Friday night, an observer may note that the students are “engaged in a put-down game of seeing who can make the others seem inferior—as ‘wimps’ or ‘teeny-boppers,’ reflecting their need to be seen as ‘tough’ or ‘grown-up.’” At the same time, based on an observed pattern in the students’ behaviors, the student may note that, “while the group engages in a lot [of] put-down games, [they] seem to enjoy these games because they don’t take them seriously.” Students can practice making these inferences by viewing videos of television programs or films that depict groups of adolescents. Reacting as an entire class, students can then discuss their perceptions of specific behaviors and their interpretations of these behaviors.

**Writing Research Reports**

Students will also need help in organizing and writing their research reports. One approach for helping students discuss and reflect on their preliminary, tentative findings is the use of “labs,” where students share information they have gathered—field notes, interviews, recordings, documents, graphs, photos—with a small group of peers. The peers then pose questions about each others’ findings, questions that provoke further thinking and reflection. As students write their drafts, they then use these labs for further feedback sessions from peers who are familiar with their work.

In drafting reports, students use a range of different organizational techniques to present their findings. Teachers may want to provide some suggestions and examples from previous students’ writings for ways to describe groups, sites, institutions, participants, or methods. This could include live or computer multimedia presentations featuring photos, video, artwork, and audio. They may also want to discuss guidelines for the use of quotes or presentations of illustrative examples.

In some cases, students may employ first-person narrative descriptions of their experiences. In doing so, they need to recognize that the narrative form itself can shape their perceptions of experience, as Tierney and Lincoln point out. In other cases, they may create a dialogic format in which their participants’ voices are juxtaposed to create a dramatic interplay. Students may also build their reports around issues, topics, themes, or problems that emerged in their research.

**Reflect on Experiences as Researchers**

At the end of their reports, students may reflect on their experiences of conducting this research—what they learned about their own beliefs and attitudes as well as their own allegiances to a cultural world. For example, students may recognize how some of their prejudices about a certain group...
changed as they found out more about the group members. G. Genevieve Patthey-Chavez notes how her own attitudes changed from her initial observations of Latino students at Lima High School in Los Angeles as she got to know them as adolescents:

The fact that the Lima students’ stylishness surprised me alerted me to my own naive and prejudged assumptions about them: I was surprised because I knew most of them were poor and from immigrant backgrounds, and because I had expected them to look poor, or else to have a kind of “fresh off the boat,” “tiquanero” look common to recent arrivals in the neighborhood. The students, obviously well aware of the implications of such looks, were determined to avoid them by applying considerable creativity to the limited material resources at their disposal. Their stylishness made me realize that they were first and foremost teenagers in the process of negotiating their transition to adulthood. (42–43)

Criteria for Evaluation

Given the wide variation in purposes and writing formats, students and teachers need to negotiate the criteria relevant for evaluating written reports prior to or during their writing. These criteria could include

- the use of descriptive details in portraying settings or participants
- the sufficiency, relevancy, validity, degree of support, and relevancy of information gathered about a group, site, or institution
- the level of awareness of the influence of one’s own beliefs and attitudes on perceptions and judgments
- the clarity and readability of the information presented

Learning to read and write as an ethnographer can transfer to other reading and writing contexts. Fifteen-year-old Angel (a student who attends a court-ordered transitional middle school for students who have been expelled) reflects on the local newspaper’s construction of herself and her peers:

So they’ve constructed us as juvenile delinquents. They make it look like we are all in trouble or on welfare or something like that. They try to make it look like we are all wards of the court. That’s BS.

Understanding how her social group was perceived by local community members, Angel set out to change the misconceptions and acknowledge the complexities of student experiences missed in the newspaper. Her work as an ethnographic reader led her to organize classmates to write the following letter, which was published in the Lafayette (IN) Journal and Courier:

We the students of TLC would like to speak out on our own behalf and rights. We are not all troubled kids or wards of the welfare system and most of us asked to return to TLC. It is true that we have had trouble in the past, but we are taking positive actions to change our behaviors so we can be respected, trusted and looked upon as young adults rather than juvenile delinquents. We have a 95% attendance rate at TLC. We earn As and Bs. If we earn lower than a B, we redo our work until we are successful. The atmosphere at TLC supports our learning. We feel respected as people. We take responsibilities for ourselves and each other. No one here laughs at others. We respect our differences and learning needs. TLC is a school for second chances. Everyone deserves a second chance. We are proud to be TLC students.

Engaging students as ethnographers of their own communities may change relationships within the classroom, allowing students to gain understanding of diverse experiences. While students may still have to enter new contexts without the rules for navigating firmly in hand, work as ethnographic writers may help them to judge unfamiliar social worlds more positively. Likewise, when students enter textual worlds, they may be able to read as ethnographers, equipped with ways to interpret that unfamiliar world.

Works Cited


Critical Thinking and the Research Paper

“Except when we simply ask our students to report their findings, we are disappointed in what they return from the library bearing. We ask them to interpret. We ask for critical thinking, but what we discover is that our students have not yet made the cognitive leap that would ensure such thinking. If, like Jean Piaget, we believe that ‘the aim of intellectual training is to form the intelligence rather than to stock the memory and to produce intellectual explorers rather than mere erudition,’ then we must focus our energies in the research paper on achieving that aim. A student who lifts indiscriminately whole sections of another writer’s work is not necessarily trying to find an easy way out. That student might actually have turned to this method as the only way out. Robert Palmer Saalbach suggests that we try to understand that plagiarism is not a problem of dishonesty so much as an inability on the part of the student to think critically.”