

5-4-2012

## Understanding the Everyday: In-class ethnography for social science students

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### Recommended Citation

Long, Jennifer (2012) "Understanding the Everyday: In-class ethnography for social science students," *Teaching Innovation Projects*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/tips/vol2/iss1/1>

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# Understanding the Everyday: In-class ethnography for social science students

## Summary

I am interested in developing hands-on learning activities that can take place within the confines of an undergraduate classroom with minimal preparation by the student. My specific discipline of anthropology has various fields of expertise yet, certain fields have an easier time applying their material in classroom settings than others; for example, archaeology and physical anthropology students have access to labs where they can practice measuring and identifying artefacts. Socio-cultural undergraduates, conversely, are most often limited to learning and applying knowledge through various forms of debate and discussion which, although an important and interesting learning tool, can become tedious over time and arguably suits only a limited range of learners. For this reason, I have developed an activity that simulates ethnographic research, a hallmark of cultural and social anthropologists' research methodology, to suit an in-class environment that actively engages students in paired discussion, group debate, and analysis of first-hand resources gathered by the students. In this paper, I explain how to use ethnography as an in-class learning strategy that provides social science and humanities lecturers with the tools to conduct similar exercises in their own classrooms.

## Keywords

ethnography, group work, participation, social science, practical application of knowledge, diversifying learning methods

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### SUMMARY

I am interested in developing hands-on learning activities that can take place within the confines of an undergraduate classroom with minimal preparation by the student. My specific discipline of anthropology has various fields of expertise yet, certain fields have an easier time applying their material in classroom settings than others; for example, archaeology and physical anthropology students have access to labs where they can practice measuring and identifying artefacts. Socio-cultural undergraduates, conversely, are most often limited to learning and applying knowledge through various forms of debate and discussion which, although an important and interesting learning tool, can become tedious over time and arguably suits only a limited range of learners. For this reason, I have developed an activity that simulates ethnographic research, a hallmark of cultural and social anthropologists' research methodology, to suit an in-class environment that actively engages students in paired discussion, group debate, and analysis of first-hand resources gathered by the students. In this paper, I explain how to use ethnography as an in-class learning strategy that provides social science and humanities lecturers with the tools to conduct similar exercises in their own classrooms.

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### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In the classroom, being told about an individual's experience can only convey so much; instead, conducting research for one's self and applying that knowledge are the next steps to learning for any student.

By the end of this seminar, participants will be able to:

- Discuss the value of engaging students in a simulated research experience over an extended period of time (one semester in this case), through weekly in-class ethnographic sessions.
- Develop a strategy and accompanying instructional plan to incorporate in-class ethnography into your personal teaching context.

### Activity Overview: Weekly Ethnography

Ethnographic research incorporates learning about a particular individual, group, or culture through personal experience. In order to conduct traditional ethnography, anthropologists often live, observe, participate with, and ask questions of those individuals they would like to know more about, for an extended period of time. Therefore, one of the hallmarks of ethnographic research is the in-depth understanding researchers develop about their subjects due to the length of time they spend in the field.

In line with this method of research, students will pair up and ask each other a set of questions at the beginning of every class throughout the semester. Each student takes turns playing the ethnographer (asking the questions) and the informant (answering questions), and it is their responsibility to document one another's answers. Questions are provided by the instructor and can range from trivial (what is your name or, how long have you lived in this city?) to more in-depth questions (tell me three things that you did to prepare for university). Each week's questions should revolve around a larger theme; for example, themes could include life as a student, learning strategies in higher education, or subjectivity in research. Analysis from student's answers over the semester can be used to bolster class discussions, as subject matter for a final writing assignment (as an alternative to writing an essay that uses secondary resources), or as material for group presentations. As a contained research environment, these students are allowed practical research experience without ever leaving the classroom. This activity is suitable for small or large classrooms. In-class attendance is not mandatory if students can communicate through on-line course resources (e.g. WebCT) that will allow the instructor to monitor weekly participation and progress.

#### REFERENCE SUMMARIES

Rice, P.C. & McCurdy D.W. (2000). *Strategies in Teaching Anthropology*. Rice and McCurdy (Eds.) New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

This is an edited volume of teaching strategies for anthropologists that provide practical examples for upper-year classrooms. This compendium is one of the few volumes available on this subject. As Yolanda T. Moses notes in the Introduction "this book is the first of its kind as far as I know to focus on the 'how' of teaching anthropology across all of its sub-fields..." (p. xv). This volume is broken down into three sections: general teaching, biological anthropology and archaeology, and cultural anthropology lessons. In the cultural section, there are a wide variety of teaching tricks for the classroom ranging from short writing assignments in big classrooms to using children's television commercials to analyse gender enculturation. This book offers practical applications of classical theory and ethnographic standards, as well as methods on how to engage with important debates in anthropology. I refer to this volume as a reference to other practical applications of material in cultural anthropology classrooms and for its overall approach to the classroom which strives for hands-on learning in an engaging environment.

Hriskos, C. (1996). Religion, magic, and witchcraft: On performing ethnography in the classroom. *Anthropology of Consciousness*, 7(1), 20-27.

In this article, Hriskos outlines a teaching strategy that shows the students "other ways of seeing and being that are radically different from their own" (p. 20). In teaching a religion, magic, and witchcraft course, Hriskos found it difficult to have students take the material seriously and as a result, introduced role playing as a teaching tool. Hriskos argues that role play allowed the students to broaden their minds when trying to 'play' a character they are not familiar with; for example, his students play the roles of an anthropologist, a witch, or a shaman. Role playing also helped to foster discussions about the ways in which

anthropologists ‘speak’ about/for their subjects. As in my own strategy, Hriskos uses a form of ethnographic discovery (observing and engaging with various pseudo informants) to teach about important material and to help students gain an understanding about one’s own positioning in relation to those one is trying to study. The use of ethnographic methodologies in the classroom allows students to engage not just with the subject matter but also fosters an opportunity for self-reflexivity and self-discovery. My only criticism for Hriskos’ teaching strategy is the amount of time needed to prepare the students for this activity, performances happen once a semester, which makes this tool an activity and less of an active strategy to use each week.

Bond, S. & Freeman, L. (May, 2005). *DART: Digital anthropology resources for Teaching*. Unpublished paper presented at C-SAP eLearning forum. Birmingham, UK.

In this conference paper, Bond and Freeman address the problems of undergraduate teaching of anthropology which are related to the paucity of digital learning tools and other learning activities (p. 2). Bond and Freeman developed a computer game that allows students to become virtual ethnographers. By signing in online, the student is first presented with a short ethnographic film that has subtitles and web-links to other contextual resources about the people and the happenings ‘around’ them. As they continue to visit the game over time, the ethnographer receives more and more information about the group and tend to develop a more nuanced understanding of their subjects. Previous tests of this tool met with acceptance and excitement from students, and the authors note that the students have: “gained insight beyond that which the text affords him, by ‘doing the fieldwork’” (for him/herself) (p. 3). Although this tool may prove difficult to access in non-wired classrooms today, and keeping in mind the importance of providing equitable education for all students and the potential limitations when accessing technology, this conference paper is important because it shows the positive reaction and outcome from students’ who are gaining long-term, first-hand experience.

## CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

The following is a breakdown of the 90 minute seminar I developed to demonstrate to educators how to conduct weekly ethnography sessions in their own classroom.

Time	Content	Question(s)
0 – 5 minutes	Welcome, introduction and seminar objectives	What do you hope to learn by incorporating ethnographic activities into your classroom?
5 – 15 minutes	Lecture and PowerPoint: includes a short overview of ethnography and its benefits as a research methodology and teaching tool.	What is ethnography? Why is it important to understand individual experiences and everyday life situations? What is scientific about

		subjective research techniques?
15 – 30 minutes	Introduce ethnographic activity to participants. Have participants from similar disciplines pair up to develop topics for examination suitable for ethnographic analysis in their own classrooms. Discuss sample topics as a group.	What kind of investigation could your students revisit every week that would provide them with a deeper understanding about a subject in your class, discipline, or research area? What larger questions do you want your students to ask after taking this course?
30 – 40 minutes	Discuss the logistics of conducting a weekly hands-on activity in the classroom.	How could you include this weekly activity into your classroom? Would this be an in-class or on-line activity? Could you use this activity for evaluation purposes?
40 – 55 minutes	Reform into pairs and select one line of investigation to develop weekly themes around that also engages with key components of larger ethnographic project. Discuss sample themes as a group.	How do your weekly themes develop a deeper understanding of the larger ethnographic project/question? How do your themes develop and change over the course of the semester?
55 – 70 minutes	Reform into pairs and draft sets of questions that coordinate with weekly themes. Discuss sample questions as a group.	Did you include trivial as well as in-depth questions? Why? As a method of research, what do your students learn by using ethnography rather than another form of investigation? How does playing the role of the researcher benefit your students?
70 – 80 minutes	Debriefing of ethnography as a tool for learning and conducting in-class research.	What are the benefits/drawbacks of incorporating mixed learning scenarios? What are the benefits/drawbacks of providing activities with little to no student preparation?

80 – 90 minutes	Questions and evaluation. Participants complete short evaluation of seminar	Was this session useful? Was this activity accessible and adaptable?
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## PRESENTATION STRATEGIES

As is the goal of this lesson, I have incorporated a variety of teaching strategies into this workshop (lecture/presentation, paired work, and group discussion). By working through a line of investigation, weekly themes, and sample questions, educators are better equipped to implement this activity into the classroom and to understand the importance and excitement that comes with practical applications of knowledge in a classroom setting. This is a self-contained workshop, that is, all knowledge that one needs to know and apply within the workshop, is provided during the workshop. I use visual aids during my presentation that I provide electronically to all participants. It is important to include time at the end of this workshop to allow for feedback that helps me be a self-reflexive educator and to develop the most efficient and effective teaching strategies.