

Writing Spaces Assignments & Activities Archive

Emotionally Aware Ethnography

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Overview

I've encountered several jarring writing submissions: an essay describing a student's family member's tragic death, an essay detailing a student's battle with an eating disorder, an essay telling of a student's loneliness in their first semester of college, and an essay recounting a student's suicidal thoughts. These were important, and generally powerful essays, and I'm the first to tell my students that writing can offer an emotional release. But these essays also presented challenges in grading, in fulfilling learning outcomes, in responding to the students, and in some cases, reporting to my university. I have found that the following adapted ethnography assignment invites students to grapple with personal and emotional themes in a format that emphasizes focus on the appropriate audiences for academic writing while also allowing students to make a positive difference in their communities.

University students continue to face unprecedented mental health challenges (Locke; "American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment II: Undergraduate Student Reference Group Executive Summary Spring 2016"; United Health Foundation). Writing can be a tool for combating some of the challenges, but writing in an academic setting can also trigger vulnerable emotions, especially when students are asked to complete personal narratives. This micro-ethnography assignment is adapted from the Georgia State University Lower Division Studies standard syllabus. Teaching skills of primary research helps fulfill the balance between personal details and private mediation that is crucial to a critical expressivist pedagogy (Ramsey; Gaillet and Eble; Roeder and Gatto). Situating internal dialogues in external places prepares students to better process emotions in academic writing. Students select a location

to study and produce an argument that has some level of personal meaning. However, instead of focusing on personal connections to the location, students highlight physical characteristics and write a narrative about their locations instead of, specifically, about their own lives.

While language's power can create internal and external change, counseling centers and trained professionals are vitally irreplaceable in times of mental health challenges and crises. Therefore, this assignment is not a be-all-end-all approach to mental health challenges. Rather, I believe that ethnography research gives students a method to approach emotional writing in a productive manner and effect positive change with their writing, a deeply rewarding process for both students and teachers.

Time Commitment

4-5 weeks

Materials

Materials include a field note journal—digital or physical—and a social media account or template (downloadable online).

Assignment Process

- Students will, with the help of their instructor and classmates, select a location to study. They will need to be able to observe at that location for two thirty-minute sessions. Examples of spaces include restaurants, coffee shops, parks, shopping areas, buses or trains, gyms, or even a common area on the internet (though this might be more difficult). Students will select times to observe.
- Then, the class will conduct practice observations together. The instructor will go with students to some common place in the school, during class time, and model observation. Gaillet and Eble provide excellent

field note guides (142). Students can be divided into groups for observations. One group will focus on observing sounds, one group artifacts, one group vibe, etc.

- Next, students will observe (based on models and instruction given through class). They will visit their selected areas two different times, using methods taught in class for observing and interviewing. The students will collect and submit field notes.
- Then, students will draft an ethnography detailing their observations in narrative format. They will examine patterns of behavior, unexpected phenomena, or some unique or unarticulated connections. Students will emphasize a thesis statement about their location with descriptions.
- Next, students will present an image and caption featuring their selected location place. Using some form of social media (or a template), students will prepare a screenshot and discuss, in a presentation, the ways in which their argument articulated for social media is different from or similar to the argument made in their essay.
- Then, students will meet with the instructor for individual conferences to discuss how to transform a narrative description into an argument.
- Finally, students will use secondary sources to build their ethnography description into an argument supported by their original observations and their extended research.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this assignment will:

- Gain an understanding of primary and secondary research methods
- Think critically about locations near their school and let those thoughts inform their writing
- Craft a thesis statement for a narrative essay
- Engage in writing as a process

- Think critically about a variety of audiences for one central argument
- Organize and reorganize information
- Engage in the collaborative, social aspects of written composition
- Use language to explore and analyze contemporary, local, and multicultural issues
- Produce coherent, organized, readable compositions for a variety of rhetorical situations

Learning Accommodations

- Instructors with limited time available might choose to only emphasize the first part of the ethnography (description narrative) or the social media presentation to make the assignment last 1-2 weeks instead of 4-5.
- Students uncomfortable visiting physical locations may choose to write about a digital community, following the same methods of observation.
- Instructors might choose to make this assignment collaborative, asking either groups of 4-5 students or even the entire class to observe one location together and craft a collaborative description, emphasizing a unified voice from a variety of perspectives.
- If more direction is needed in helping students form thesis statements for the descriptions, instructors might adapt the assignment to include the prompt: "Create a definition of your space." Then, when students are presenting, comparisons of definitions can be used to make a synthesis definition of your community or school.

Works Cited

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Further Reading

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