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Objects and Documents for Disciplinary
Development
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Object Ethnography for the Real-World: Using Objects and Documents for Disciplinary Development

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Overview

As Writing Studies has sought to address multimodal and embodied composition, one area has focused on how objects mediate writing processes and identity formations (Shipka). This assignment represents a final term project for an advanced composition class with the overall objective of complicating students' thinking regarding the interplay between writing, genre, identity, and object. This assignment, titled *Object Ethnography for the Real-World*, is comprised of six sections, each of which is geared towards certain sub-topics and skills. These sections include abstract, introduction, annotated bibliography, (authentic) documents, one-week object ethnographic observation, and reflection. As will be illustrated further below, this semester-long object ethnography project primarily aims to engage students with composing two professional documents that are significant to their professional development (e.g., applying for a summer internship in marketing for a business-major student) (D'Agostino), undertaking an ethnographic observation task of *an object* in that professional development process (e.g., a marketing portfolio), and theorizing the relation between the two documents and the object. This final assignment serves to bridge students' specific disciplinary interests within a more humanities-centered advanced composition class while still helping them hone essential academic research skills (e.g., scouting and annotating sources, writing observation memos, or composing findings) so that they can better appreciate that writing, disciplinary identity, and object are all imbricated in a complicated, long-term process of becoming (Roozen and Erickson)

Context

This assignment, though choreographed specifically for an advanced composition course within a specific programmatic context, can be readily adjusted for additional research and/or writing courses and be tailored for students at different academic levels.

Time Commitment

9-10 weeks (including a mid-term proposal, the final-project prompt explication, two rounds of peer review, one individual instructor-student conference, and one student presentation)

Materials

Due to the multimodal and multi-step nature of this assignment, a plethora of materials are necessary, and they include: students' selected objects; the institutional course management system for the prompt; a video-walkthrough tutorial of the prompt; the rubric sheet; a Google Doc for peer review; and a recording device of students' choice (e.g., cell phone, video camera, audio recorder, journal, notebook, etc.).

Assignment or Activity Process

- First, students will need to compose a mid-term proposal, which aims to serve as an outline for the final project; both assignments share similar components, so that students will also feel less burdened of needing to craft materials anew in their final project and can readily carry some of the components in their mid-term proposal into their final project. In the mid-term proposal, students will propose two professional documents that they intend to work on related to their professional activity and development (e.g., a

business cover letter and a business recommendation letter) and one object therein (e.g., a business card) that they desire to observe. In their proposal, they are also required to find three sources to annotate based on the knowledge-parameter list created by themselves (for their final project, they will be required to find an additional three for source annotation). This list is adapted from Stacey Waite's (2017) *Teaching Queer* and is meant to help students define (re)searchable questions and the scope of their projects. The three lists ask that they lay out questions that they do not know, that they know, and that they cannot know (Waite 70). With the lists created on their mid-term proposal, students will have a better sense of the scope of their final project. For instance, for many of my students who seek for summer internships but do not know how to write a cover letter, they would put down an "I don't know" item such as "I don't know how to write a cover letter." Based on this question that they themselves come up with, they would then find (re)sources about how to write a cover letter and in the final project, actually write a cover letter (as one of the documents). The mid-term proposal is aimed to be submitted around Week 8 (can be flexible) in a Week-16 curriculum.

- Next, after the mid-term proposal, to help scaffold students for the completion of the final project, the rest of the curriculum is dedicated to primarily accomplishing the following: how to undertake a one-week object ethnography and how to theorize the interconnectedness between professional documents, objects, and identities. More explanation is provided below.
- One class activity after the mid-term proposal is that of a(n) (micro) object ethnography to help students become adept at the process of observing the object. This is one of the class activities to introduce students to what an (object)

ethnography involved and what it does. Before the micro-object ethnography activity, however, students will first read Catherine Kell's (2015) article on the movement of artifacts and objects, and discuss, in one class session, not only how objects travel but also how ethnographers can observe the movement of objects, the latter of which aims to introduce students to different methodological tools (e.g. naked-eyes observation, video camera, audio recorder, drawing, etc.).

- After the reading discussion, in the next class meeting, students will explore the campus and choose one object for observation by using one of the methodological tools introduced in the previous session (see above). For instance, one of my former students video-recorded (with permission) a lunchbox held by a passer-by. Prior to taking students out of the classroom for a campus observation, I will spend 5-10 minutes going over a set of questions (e.g., what are some challenges you encountered during your observation) for students to think through during the observation. Then, students will be given the time (roughly 30-35 minutes) to observe the movement of objects around the campus area and work on their ethnography notes along the way. This micro-object ethnography class activity will then conclude by bringing students back to the classroom and having them reflect on their relation as observers with their chosen object and describe what they have discerned through the movement of objects and some of the challenges undertaking an object ethnography. This part of the class discussion can be done by having students put down their written observation notes on a Google Doc first and then discuss some of their ideas as either a small group or a whole class, depending on the amount of time left for this session.
- Once students have become familiar—both conceptually and in an applied sense—with object ethnography, two

important readings that students will be introduced to before/when working on their own object ethnography are Vieira's (2011) piece of documentation and Roozen and Erickson's (2017) *Expanding literate landscapes*. Vieira's article is critical in terms of helping students grasp the imperative of literacy powers associated with genres and documents. Roozen and Erickson's piece is critical in the sense that it ties together how objects that they choose to observe can be both relatable and related to their professional writing and identity. Some of the discussion questions from this reading include: (a) What are some professional objects that you need to interact with to become a professional in your respective field?, (b) How do these objects play a role in the professionalization process?, (c) How does writing in your field inform your professionalization?, and (d) What kind of relation do you see between (professional) objects, writing, and identities? For instance, one student discussed how in the field of speech therapy, learning how to precisely use the audiometer (as an object) and accurately report clients' conditions in the therapy session note is critical for a speech therapist. These questions, which students will engage more critically and deeply in the final project through their field object observation, are important for them to pay meticulous attention to the ways in which professionalization is deeply laminated with objects and literacies.

- Once the three readings and the micro-object ethnography activity have been introduced to students, the rest of the curriculum can be devoted to whatever auxiliary skills students are expected to master. For instance, my students will be required to compose an abstract for their final project, so I typically include one session on teaching how to write an abstract. Besides, there is also one class session dedicated to resources-pooling. As students will work on professional

writing in their own respective fields (e.g., business writing, technical writing, etc.), I'll also spend one class introducing to them some useful resources (e.g., Purdue Writing Lab, Writing Center on campus), or in some cases, as students are more knowledgeable about their own fields and the writing requirements therein, they can also share resources with other students working on similar genres/documents. These additional units can remain flexible should there be more activities and discussions about objects to be had.

- Once the preparation work is complete, students will then work on their own object observation (ethnography) and compose two professional documents that they choose. In the process, some supporting activities include individual conferences with the instructor and two peer review sessions with students working on similar genres/documents.
- This final project will end by having each student present their professional documents and the object. As the advanced composition class that I have been teaching typically has a relatively large number of students, this individual presentation can be short (e.g., 5-minute). By the time students present their final project, they are not required to have their final project completed. The main purposes of the individual presentation are to showcase the breadth of different disciplinary writings and to pool resources collectively.
- Students can turn in their final project either before the semester wraps up or after the curriculum ends and before the grade entry is due, depending on the instructor's preference.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this assignment will

- Become more attuned to the interrelation between objects, professional identities, and writing processes
- Generate documents specific and tailored to one's self-identified profession
- Learn how to conduct a micro-object-centered ethnographic observation
- Experiment with different genres of writing (e.g., field notes or observation memo)
- Produce critical reflections on one's writing

Learning Accommodations

- All the materials and steps should be explicated both synchronously and asynchronously. As this assignment is designed to be a final project and involves serial steps and meticulous preparation work, students might benefit from having a video tutorial of the assignment, in addition to an in-class prompt explanation, on the course management system.
- Should students have no ready access to objects they intend to observe, instructors should provide other alternatives. For instance, on my assignment sheet, I allow my students to observe a week-long writing process as an alternative to the *object* observation. That is, they have a viable option to observe their writing process (Rule) for one week, and in fact, many turn to observing how they interact with their laptops, on which is one of the prime tools for their writing to happen.
- Since my class is an advanced (rhetoric) composition class that is not geared towards specific disciplinary or technical writing, it is important to create items that can help

instructors assess students' disciplinary documents justly and fairly. For instance, in my class, I emphasize writing as a process (Rule); thus, on the rubric sheet, I explicitly let students know that their cover letters or lab reports, for instance, will not be graded based on the entirety and completion but rather on the process of creating those professional documents and on how they deliberate over the relation between objects, documents, identities, and writing.

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