Teaching Ethnography in the Composition Classroom

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When I learned I would be teaching a section of composition for a learning community titled "Psychology: Understanding the Person," I wanted to find a focus that would fit with the theme better than the rhetorical modes approach I had used in previous semesters. I paired the textbook *FieldWorking: Reading and Writing Research* by Bonnie Stone Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater with Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried,* a novel which follows a group of soldiers through the Vietnam War and its aftermath. This approach allowed me to introduce my students to ethnography, the written study of another culture. While not every student's paper was exceptional, the writing my students produced as they studied subcultures such as a volunteer fire department, the local airport, and skateboarding parks was, overall, much better than what I had received in previous classes. Based on my own observations, my students' written reactions after completing their ethnographies, and other teacher-researchers' inquiries into this subject, I believe that ethnographic research is more effective than traditional research for improving the research writing skills of first-year composition students.

What is Ethnography?

Ethnography is the "written representation of a culture (or selected aspects of a culture)" (Van Maanen 1). Rituals,

dress, songs, speech, actions, artifacts, and social hierarchies are all included under the ethnographic umbrella. Ethnographies point out the "choices and restrictions that reside at the very heart of social life" (Van Maanen 1). Why are desks arranged in rows in classrooms? How do we know what to wear and what to yell at a football game? What other invisible rules do we follow as we go through our daily lives? These are the kinds of questions ethnographers investigate. The method of ethnography is fieldwork, going out and observing the culture first-hand. Ethnographies are anthropological in orientation, often in-depth, book-length studies of a culture as observed over a span of several years. Obviously, first-year composition students do not have the time or expertise to complete works of this magnitude. But ethnography can be adapted for use in the composition classroom. "Mini" or "micro" ethnographies of a more limited scope and time frame can allow first- year composition students to reap the benefits of ethnographic work.

FieldWorking: Reading and Writing Research encourages students to investigate local subcultures. My students were able to spend time at research sites such as a local tattoo parlor and a nearby skate park. They interviewed informants such as pilots at the local airport and Vietnam veterans participating in an oral history project. Armed with notebooks and cameras, my students set out to record the subcultures and attempt to interpret their findings.

I required that the subculture they investigated be one they were not members of, and also one which they could get permission from the group members to study. This was key to avoiding one of the major pitfalls of ethnographic research: the inability to collect data. Two of my students wanted to do a study of the local morgue, but, upon investigation, discovered they could not have access to the morgue itself. Instead, they ended up studying a group of pathologists working with samples from live patients rather than dead bodies.

How Does the Use of Ethnography Relate to Other Approaches to Composition?

Using ethnography in the composition classroom can involve aspects of many theories of composition. Ethnographic

writing can be incorporated into a Service Learning project, as two of my students did who spent time in an alternative classroom. The Expressivist insistence on the writer finding his or her authentic voice is built into the first-hand knowledge-gathering that ethnographic essays require. Process pedagogues will also relate to the multiple drafts, visions and revisions that are crucial to finding and refining an angle on the culture being studied. Collaborative work can easily be incorporated through the use of partner projects, which I will discuss in detail later. Feminist teachers of composition might also find things to like in the ethnographic approach. While ethnography does not ask students to critique, or to discover "what is wrong" with the culture they are studying, the power dynamics of the culture, both overt and subtle, are keys to understanding the culture.

In addition, Cultural Studies followers will be pleased to note that everything at the research site becomes a text—the "No Skateboarding" signs inside an indoor skate park, the songs played at a college hockey game, and even the posters for a sorority event placed in the dormitories. Obviously, different instructors will choose to highlight different things and will tailor their ethnographic readings and assignment accordingly. When I argue for the use of ethnography in the composition classroom, then, I am not arguing for a "new" theory of composition. Instead, I am arguing for a mode of teaching and learning that is flexible and fits with many instructors' goals.

Benefits of the Ethnographic Approach

The ethnographic approach has many benefits, including allowing students to become more involved with their research topics as they search for information from primary and secondary sources, getting students out into the community to make contact with people unlike themselves, and guiding students as they acquire the important skills of observation, analysis, interpretation, and synthesis by triangulating their data and forming and testing hypotheses.

I think one of the biggest benefits of the ethnographic approach is that students get out into the world and become ac-

tive researchers from the very beginning. Many of my students commented in their final portfolios that they enjoyed the fact that they did not spend all of their time reading, and that they got to go out and explore their topics first-hand, through interactions with people, in addition to traditional library research.

In his essay "Students as Ethnographers: Encouraging Authority," William W. Wright states that "[e]thnography encourages students to see themselves as the experts, authorities on their subject" (105). This new confidence is a direct result of students being able to collect data from primary sources. One of my students, Chloe, compared herself to a scientist "looking for answers to a hypothesis and being able to interact with the actual environment." She saw herself in an active role as someone uniquely in control of her project, similar to the way a scientist is in control of, but can also be surprised by, the results of an experiment. Instead of the "disheartening experience of writing to an audience that knows more about [the] subject and will always know more about [the] subject" than they did, these students were very conscious of teaching me and the rest of the class what they had learned (Wright 107). Their final presentations were not simply the ideas of experts they had lined up neatly in a row, but rather their own insights set against those of the experts. They had a basis from which to agree or argue what they read in books, magazines, and web sites.

When students go out into the community, collect data, and become experts on their topics, something else also happens: they discover their voices as writers. This is not a new idea in the field of composition. Ken Macrorie, in his book *The I-Search Paper*, bemoans the use of what he calls "Engfish," student prose that tries to sound academic and ends up stilted, distanced, and boring (25). Macrorie maintains that students need to get out and own their material so that they can then report on those topics in their own voices. Davis and Shadle, in their article "'Building a Mystery': Alternative Research Writing and the Academic Act of Seeking," assert that the traditional freshman composition research paper is "vacant, clichéd and templated" (417). They give a history of the research paper as-

signment and argue for alternative approaches that allow students freedom to learn and grow. Although they do not mention ethnography specifically, they do bring up several related ideas, such as the personal research essay, akin to Macrorie's I-Search paper, and I believe that ethnography would fit their definition of a new, improved research assignment. Instead of filling in a cookie-cutter thesis statement which argues a predetermined point, the ethnographic approach asks students to observe the subculture, make hypotheses, and then test these hypotheses against a wide variety of sources. These papers are often narrative in nature, like I-Search and other personal research essays.

In her paper presented at the 2000 Conference on College Composition and Communication, "Risking Exposure: Branch Campus Writers Go Public," Helen Collins Sitler, an instructor at a branch campus of a mid-sized state university in southwest Pennsylvania, describes ethnography as a "successful pedagogy for positioning [her] students as capable scholars" (5). Her students, many of them developmental writers who were "among the most at-risk students" in the state university system, gave a presentation at the main branch campus during an undergraduate research conference (7). Their "presentation was more substantial than that of the senior Technical Writing students who presented in the same session with them," which amazed other faculty members (7). Sitler maintains that her students had never before felt ownership over their writing, and for the first time they were able to gain the confidence to speak in an eloquent and persuasive manner (7).

Although Sitler's "underprepared" students underwent a more dramatic change than my learning community students, I saw the same process at work in my classroom. The writing I received from them on their ethnographic projects was better than I expected. One of my students, Pete, even remarked in his final portfolio that he felt his writing came together and felt more "fluent" after he had had a chance to talk with workers at the state-run mental health facility he visited. The face-to-face interactions directly affected his confidence, and therefore his writing.

Because ethnography is new, and therefore intimidating

for many students, I gave my students the option of working in pairs. They had to write their own final papers, but they could do their observations together. This seemed especially feasible since these students were in a learning community, lived together in the dormitory, and took several classes together, making their schedules more compatible than most students' schedules in a regular composition classroom. Out of my class of twenty-five students, sixteen students chose to work in pairs, and nine students chose to work alone. Of the students who worked in pairs, all but one group reported having a positive experience. Two typical comments were "I wasn't alone so I was more outgoing" and "the nice thing about having a partner is you can have someone to discuss observations with." Building the courage to approach strangers and ask if you can study them is intimidating. Partners seemed to help with that. Also, since ethnography is filtered through the consciousness of the observer, having two observers meant students could bounce ideas off each other, perhaps disagree, and then be forced to rethink their interpretations. This type of collaborative experience, in which students relied on each other for meaning-making and for help and motivation in working on their projects, also helped to decenter the classroom.

My students who chose not to work in pairs did so because they were afraid of scheduling conflicts and having to rely on someone else to get their projects done. I asked my students at the end of the semester, however, if they would have liked to have been assigned feedback partners. While working on their own individual ethnographies, these students could have worked together over the course of the semester, becoming familiar with each other's projects and therefore operating, in a limited way, as a second set of eyes for each other. Most students responded positively to this idea. Even though they were glad they had conducted their ethnographies individually, they felt they had missed out on the benefits of having a partner who was familiar with their projects. Also, one of my students suggested that, by making students accountable to each other during these sessions, the partners will help students to stay "on track" with their projects. While I would not require students to conduct ethnographies in

pairs, especially since students who are not in a learning community would have even more trouble coordinating their schedules, I think I will try the peer-review pair approach in the future.

Learning from Student Feedback

While I received much positive student feedback about the ethnography project, two comments kept reappearing in my students' final portfolios. One, students wanted more time to conduct their ethnographic studies. This was often a logistical issue. Although we spent roughly half of the semester on the ethnography project, by the time students found a subculture to study and received permission to do so, they had to quickly work observation and interview time into their schedules. When I use this approach again, I think I will at least start the topic selection process earlier, so that students have their sites approved and in place in plenty of time to do the real ethnographic research. I was excited by my students' desire to have more time to work on their projects. Instead of being glad their projects were finished and turned in, they wanted to learn more about their topics. They had experienced some level of success, but they were also aware of what they could have done with more time. Abbie wished she could have attended skateboard competitions that took place earlier in the fall; Chloe thought that with a few more weeks she could have gotten the students in the alternative classroom she visited to open up to her more. If nothing else, these students learned that it takes time, patience, and planning to carry out successful research.

When I asked students to identify the most frustrating part of conducting their ethnographies, they told me they found it difficult to interweave all of their different sources: observations, interviews, books, articles, and television shows. This was also exciting to me because I knew that my students had, for the most part, collected more different kinds of data than they had in past research papers. Therefore, selecting and arranging their data were very challenging tasks indeed. The narrative nature of the ethnographic paper was new to them as well. Telling the story of a culture is a complex endeavor, and mak-

ing the story hang together means focusing on what matters. I did try to combat some of their anxiety about having to "use everything" by having them turn in portfolios, an idea from Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater's text. In their portfolios, students could represent the work that went into their final papers, even the material that wouldn't fit neatly with the angle they chose to report on. They organized all of their notes and findings in a folder, labeled each piece, and created a table of contents.

Still, I think I could have prepared them better for the final reality that not all of their material would make its way into their paper. It was crucial that students find an angle on their culture. For example, Lynsie and Chris followed the trials of the only female firefighter in a volunteer fire station, and Bryan looked at security at the Mankato regional airport since the 9-11 attacks. These students did not have these angles in mind when they began doing their research, however. First they had to explore the subculture and see what was going on. They probably could have used more time and more prodding to find an angle. In other words, I think their frustration was a failure on my part more than a failure of the ethnographic approach itself.

How Does Ethnography Prepare Students for Other College-Level Work?

Ethnography might be fun, interesting, and empowering for student writers. It may even allow students to produce some of their best writing to date. But how does it do what the composition class is supposed to do—that is, prepare student writers for advanced college-level work? Just last week, I met with a faculty book group concerning creating significant learning experiences. As often happens in our bimonthly sessions, our discussion deteriorated into complaining about students rather than looking for ways to improve our teaching methods. A tax law professor said that when he puts students out into the world they don't have the interpersonal skills to deal with real clients. Although these students are competent in doing returns, they freeze up when they have to deal with the real people behind the returns. Several education faculty said that students sent out to observe classrooms

are unable to see and interpret what is going on in the classroom, and so they complain that they are not doing anything worthwhile.

As my colleagues spoke, I was struck by how a background in ethnography would help students in both of these situations. The students in my class had to negotiate their entry into a culture foreign to them, which meant gaining the confidence to deal with strangers. As one of my students commented, "I have never done an interview for a paper before. I think it was a good experience and will help me later in life." Another student wrote about the ethnography project: "It got me out and about talking with people. It has made me less scared of experiencing new things." Both of these students developed interpersonal skills which will serve them well as they enter advanced classes which require students to take those first tentative steps into the larger world of their chosen professions. My students also spent a great deal of time honing their skills as careful observers, drawing maps, making field notes, conducting interviews, and trying to make sense of what they saw and heard. I do not think any of these students would come back from a classroom observation with an empty notebook. Of course, this was not a fast or easy process. My students did several practice observations and read professional and student examples in their text.

Since we used *The Things They Carried* and other readings in *FieldWorking: Reading and Writing Research* as objects of observation, my students also practiced close-reading skills and had an opportunity to learn from each other's responses to the readings. They learned what to look for when they encounter something new, be it a written text, a visual text, or a scene that is unfolding before them. We cannot expect students to gain these skills on their own. Ethnographic research provides the scaffolding that supports students as they make this journey.

Resources for Teachers

In addition to Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater's text, I encountered several books in my research that may be of help to teachers who want to use an ethnographic approach in the composition classroom. *The Curious Reader: Explor-*

ing Personal and Academic Inquiry, by Bruce Ballenger and Michelle Payne, includes a chapter titled "Seeing Thickly: Ethnography as a Mode of Inquiry," and also includes ethnographic readings and techniques in several other chapters (203-270). This would be a good book for the teacher who wanted to include an ethnographic project as one type of research essay in a course which required several research essays.

Another resource is Wendy Bishop's *Ethnographic Writing Research: Writing It Up, Writing It Down, and Reading It*. A how-to book for would-be ethnographers, Bishop's text provides a good overview of the history of and move towards ethnographic approaches. She also discusses practical concerns about designing studies, collecting data, representing the "other" in an ethical way, and responding to ethnographic research (qualitative as opposed to quantitative research). This book would work well if paired with a book-length ethnography such as Dennis Covington's *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in America*.

Last but not least, I think our students are one of our greatest resources. Mine have taught me a lot already about how to teach ethnography in the future. I have also collected several of their papers, with their permission, and I intend to use them as examples in future courses. Several of my students also suggested that I invite former students to discuss their ethnographic projects and answer questions. If first-year students see sophomores who have succeeded in conducting this type of research, they may see the project as one they, too, can undertake. This suggestion is also exciting in that my former students now see themselves as experienced student researchers in the position to help guide other student researchers. Perhaps that is the strongest evidence I can offer for the use of the ethnographic approach in the composition classroom.

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