

BACKYARD ETHNOGRAPHY: STUDYING YOUR HIGH SCHOOL

by Carolyn Gecan and Amanda Hurowitz



Ethnographic fieldwork is a foundation block of cultural anthropology. The syllabi of introductory courses in cultural anthropology often include reading one or more of the ethnographic classics. Works such as Richard B. Lee's *The !Kung San: Men, Women, and Work in a Foraging Society*; Napoleon Chagnon's *Yanomano*; Colin M. Turnbull's *The Forest People*; or Elizabeth Marshall Thomas' *The Harmless People* can be found on many an undergraduate reading list. Professors who have experienced the challenges and joys of conducting research in the field enliven their lectures with data, anecdotes, and illustrations from their field work.

But how might a high school social studies or anthropology teacher, who has quite likely never experienced ethnographic field research first-hand, teach about it? How might that teacher provide a hands-on fieldwork experience that simulates the type of data gathering common to ethnographers in the field?

My colleague Amanda Hurowitz and I are history teachers who have grappled with these questions in the five years we have collaboratively taught an anthropology elective course at our high school in northern Virginia. Confronted with practical realities imposed by time constraints and budget—there's never enough time in a semester and rarely any funding for such “frills”—we have successfully implemented the project described below. A primary goal of this activity is encouraging students to investigate a macro culture by identifying and exploring the micro cultures within their high school community. They do this by employing a tool of anthropological fieldwork, the interview.

After reading the description of our project you might want to read about a similar activity discussed in “Fieldwork in the Classroom” by Martha Williams, a former Fairfax County Public School teacher. That article, originally published in the Winter 1981 issue of *AnthroNotes*, discusses anthropology students interviewing the students in an ESL class (English as Second Language) at a suburban high school in Northern Virginia with a large immi-

grant population. Appropriate timing for either of these activities would be after your students have been introduced to concepts associated with the study of culture, the nature of ethnographic fieldwork, and the role of participant observation in gathering data. The project described below fits comfortably into two 90 minute class periods, but can easily be expanded.

Fieldwork in Your School

To prepare our students for the fieldwork experience, we begin with a brainstorming session. Encouraging students to think of the school as a micro-culture, we ask them to list questions that can help us learn more about our school's population. The brainstorm list is then vetted by removing questions that are insensitive, intrusive, too personal, or ethnocentric. Over the years, our students have consistently produced variations on the list of questions that Martha Williams' students created in 1981. Paraphrased, they are:

- What are the clubs, organizations, and sports teams to which you belong?
- How do these different organizations operate? What are the rules, written or unwritten, governing the behavior of the participants in each group?
- When you first joined these organizations, how did you identify or figure out their rules?

Additional inquiries we have used expand upon that platform:

- In what ways did you moderate or change your participation to fit in with the organization's traditions?
- How has your participation in clubs, organizations, and sports teams changed during your years in high school?
- What do you think are the contributions of such institutions to the life of the school community?

We urge our students to limit the length of their interview to about 10 to 15 minutes. Although the list of questions seems brief, many students report that their interviews extended well beyond the suggested time limit.

The class collaborates to construct a questionnaire that all will use in their research. Typically at the top of the

page are spaces to record basic information about the interview subject such as name, gender, and grade level. Beneath that data we include a reminder to ask the interview subject for permission to take notes on or to record the session. There is also space for the interview subject to sign or initial giving their permission. The remainder of the document consists of the interview questions with space beneath each one for notes on the subject's response. We urge our students to take notes even if they have opted to use a recording device to capture the conversation. A few students have chosen to video their interviews. In addition to allowing students who want to record or video tape their interview with the informant's permission, we also encourage our student ethnographers to take a photo, if their informant agrees. All students are required to bring their interview notes, transcripts, and photos to class on the due date.

We also work on helping our students build confidence about conducting interviews. For some, this type of data gathering is new. Practicing briefly on each other within the safety of their own classroom is a good first step. Questionnaires in hand, the class divides into pairs or trios to practice asking the questions and taking notes on responses. Everyone gets a chance to be both interviewer and subject. Following the practice session, the class is assembled to discuss the students' observations about the process and the answers they received. It is also a good time to answer questions about the assignment.

Identifying a subject to interview is a big hurdle faced by our budding "ethnographers." We urge them to find a subject with whom they are comfortable, but we once again use the brainstorm technique to widen our horizons beyond the level of immediate acquaintances. Since we are doing this research in order to gain insights into our school as a culture, the entire population of the school community comes into play. Some students opt to interview acquaintances in their same grade because doing so keeps them within their comfort level. Others may be interested in talking with students in grades higher or lower than their own. Although we expect all of our students to attempt this assignment, we do not force any particular interview subject on anyone. We think that students exercising choice have a more satisfactory experience overall.

If you and your class are interested in developing a study of the whole school, then members of the adult

community should also be interviewed. We suggest brainstorming a separate questionnaire for use with teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, custodians, secretaries, security officers and cafeteria workers. Students who are comfortable taking on this pool of informants should be the ones to undertake this part of the project. The questions on this questionnaire might inquire into the nature of the person's job, how he or she learned about the job, what rules and regulations they follow, what are the important values and traditions the school represents, and what are their contributions to the school community.

The second class period, about a week after the interview, is the due date when all the interview data are brought to class for sharing and analysis. You might have one or two class periods for sharing. One way to stimulate thoughtful discussion is to begin with a writing activity based on the interview transcripts. We have used prompts such as

- What did you learn about your subject?
- What did you learn about yourself as an interviewer?
- What traditions, customs, and values of the school culture became apparent through the interview?
- What did you learn about doing an ethnographic fieldwork interview?

Transitioning from the writing activity to small group discussion allows students to discuss details from their interviews and their writings in a more intimate setting. They also are able to compare experiences. Groups then report out to the entire class. Another technique is to follow the writing activity with a seminar by seating the students in a discussion circle. Starting from the writing prompts, students in our classes have always been excited to talk about their discoveries.

We like to extend the "fieldwork" activities described above by discussing our school as a macro culture and figuring out if there are micro cultures within it. Since our school is a community of around 2,000 people, we always manage to identify several micro cultures. Commonly our students discover micro cultures that identify with certain places or activities within the school such as the SysLab (the systems lab dominated by computer programmers), the drama

department (which subdivides into "techies" and actors), and inter-mural sports practice areas (jocks subdivided by sport). There are also micro cultures that the students identify by club participation: Model UN, Quiz Bowl, Debate, Math Team, Islamic Alliance, and Fellowship of Christian Athletes—to name just a few of the numerous organizations present at our high school. We follow up by looking for evidence in our interview data of social hierarchies, initiation rites, gender roles, customs, and rituals within these micro cultures.

In conclusion, we have found the fieldwork project to be a very worthwhile activity for our anthropology students. In their end-of-course reviews this project stands out as a consistent favorite semester after semester.

NOTES:

1. The authors are indebted to the article "Fieldwork in the Classroom" by Martha Williams, a former Fairfax County Public School teacher. The article was originally published in the Winter 1981 issue of *AnthroNotes*, vol. 3, no. 1. Available online at http://anthropology.si.edu/outreach/Teaching_Activities/pdf/ieldworkinClassroom2009.pdf

2. For a different view of teaching the fieldwork process to university level students, see "Collaborative Ethnography" by Luke Eric Lassiter, published in *AnthroNotes*, Vol. 25, No. 1, Spring 2004.

http://anthropology.si.edu/outreach/anthnote/anthronotes_2004spring.pdf

3. A brief article about fieldwork that our students have enjoyed reading and discussing prior to commencing their own project is Richard B. Lee's "Eating Christmas in the Kalahari." First published in *Natural History*, December 1969, pp. 14-22, 60-64, this article can be downloaded in pdf format from several sites. <http://www.windward.hawaii.edu/facstaff/dagrossa-p/articles/EatingChristmas.pdf> Another article is George Gmelch's "Lessons from the Field." <http://home.earthlink.net/~youngturck/LessonsFromtheFieldArticle.htm>

4. To explore the ethics of conducting fieldwork, read an excerpt from Chapter 3, "Cases and Solutions," of Sue-Ellen Jacobs' *Handbook on Ethical Issues in Anthropology*, go to <http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ch3.htm>

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