
What Was College Like for You?

Ethnography as a Teaching Tool

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Abstract

The purpose of this learning activity was to teach undergraduate students about recreation and leisure experiences of the older members of the Lumbee Tribe who attended the local university. This activity utilized ethnographic interviews to teach students about the local community and college life for those from older generations. Ethnography is a valuable teaching tool for since it teaches students 1) how to conduct interviews, and 2) about contemporary history. In completing this activity, students were to learn what college was like in the past, what life was like in a rural, farming area, and about the contemporary history of leisure and recreational activities. The activity discusses the procedures undertaken by the instructor and the students and emergent domains. Recommendations for future use of the activity include: Finding informants with a connection to the institution, pre-selecting informants for the students, and proving an individual component for the group assignment.

KEYWORDS: Interview, ethnography, contemporary history, Lumbee Tribe

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Introduction

Historically, most colleges and universities have isolated students from the broader host community (Bruning, McGrew, & Cooper, 2006). The division between a university and its host community can be traced back to medieval Europe, when universities viewed their host cities as corrupting influences (Bruning, et al., 2005). The separation deepened in twentieth-century United States as universities further isolated themselves from their host communities and developed an increasing number of on-campus facilities and amenities for students (Bruning, et al., 2006; Martin, Smith, and Phillips, 2005). However, in recent years, colleges and universities have tried to reach out to their surrounding communities by seeking out common ground and creating programs to engage host communities (Bruning, et al., 2006).

In some instances, the host community shapes the university's identity. This is the case at a regional public university, which began in 1887 as a normal school for Indians of the Lumbee Tribe who resided in the host county. Since that time, the school has become a four-year collegiate institution and opened up admission to all. Despite these changes, one cannot understand the university without understanding the experiences of and connection to the tribe.

The purpose of this learning activity was to teach students about the recreation and leisure experiences of elder members of the Lumbee Tribe who attended the local university and to provide students with personal connections to the local community. In completing this activity, students would learn what college was like for tribal elders, what life was like in a rural, farming community, and about the contemporary history of leisure and recreational activities.

Students learned to conduct ethnographic interviews because the intent of this format best suited the goals of the learning activity. Spradley (1979) explained ethnographic research to be "learning from people" rather than studying them. Ethnography allowed the students to try to understand information from the perspective of the people providing it (Henderson, 2006). In the study of recreation and leisure, ethnography can help to understand people's behavior (Henderson, 2006), which was the intent of this activity—learning what people had done for recreation and leisure and why.

Practical Foundations

The activity was designed to achieve three broad goals: 1) Enhancing the "town and gown" relationship, 2) Making history come alive, and 3) Teaching students how to conduct interviews. Undergraduate students spend a limited amount of time in college and the host community before moving on to jobs or graduate education. Whether aware of it or not, students do have a role in the shaping of the history of an institution and the broader community. Learning about the history of a university by interviewing past attendees helps students to establish their own connections to the institution and begin to understand the importance of personal history in shaping collective history.

Textbooks used in an introductory course, such as *Leisure and Life Satisfaction* (Edginton, DeGraaf, Dieser, & Edginton, 2006) and *Introduction to Recreation and Leisure*

(ed. Human Kinetics, 2006) provide a good summary of leisure and recreation across many societies throughout history; however, these textbooks do not afford students access to more regional or personal accounts of history. Furthermore, most students enrolled in the course were recreation students and did not express a strong interest in the study of history. This learning activity sought to rectify this lack of information and generate an interest in history.

Despite the importance of involving students in the host community and adding a human dimension to the study of history, the assignment was guided by a practical consideration; students needed to learn to conduct interviews. Practicing this skill helps prepare students for employment after graduation. For instance, the interview is a data collection technique that can be used by programmers for needs assessment and evaluation (Russell & Jamieson, 2008).

Description of the Learning Activity

This learning activity was intended to 1) teach students to conduct interviews and 2) involve students in the town by introducing them to residents and letting them learn about the area's distinctive culture, which has shaped the university historically. After selecting a bounded population for study—tribal elders who attended the university—and receiving human subjects approval from the university's Institutional Review Board, the instructor contacted two cultural insiders for introduction to the local Lumbee community; both were female, members of the Lumbee Tribe, and graduates and current employees of the university. The cultural insiders provided the instructor with the names of eight local tribal elders, ranging in age from late 50s to early 80s. The instructor contacted each individual by phone, and she explained how each had been selected, what the assignment involved, and that participation could be halted at any time. All agreed to participate. Upon receiving permission from all informants, the instructor split the students into eight groups to complete the assignment, which included: 1) group interview, 2) group PowerPoint presentation, and 3) individual paper covering many of the same topics as the group presentation.

As a whole, the class learned about how to conduct an ethnographic interview and together developed a list of questions to be used (Henderson, 2006). These questions addressed things students needed to find out to complete the assignment: A description of the person interviewed, what the group learned about the person, the effect of leisure and recreation on the person, an in-depth description of one activity, and the value of leisure and recreation for the person. The instructor typed and distributed the list of questions generated by the class. Each group was encouraged to use these questions and to ask about anything that piqued their interest. In addition to a list of questions, each group received a letter to provide to its informant reminding informants that participation was voluntary and could be ceased. The letter also included contact information for the instructor and the Institutional Review Board. Each group of students contacted its informant with information provided by the instructor. Groups had approximately four weeks to complete the interview prior to class the presentations.

As the interview process unfolded, one informant mentioned that his brother was visiting from another state and would like to be interviewed. Because no students were

available, the instructor interviewed him. She wrote a paper based on the interview and presented her data to the class. Students graded the instructor on her presentation with the same scoring rubric used to assess their presentations, allowing them to consider oral presentation skills as evaluators, rather than as presenters, and to discuss the importance of professionalism in presentation.

At the conclusion of each day of presentations, the class identified commonalities in all presentations to that point and provided concrete examples for these commonalities. From this discussion, the class identified six "larger units of cultural knowledge," or domains (Spradley, 1979, p. 94). These were: importance of the church, importance of education, farming, small campus size, inexpensive tuition, and lack of technology.

Group members submitted their papers on the assigned presentation days. Individuals' grades for the assignment were assessed as follows: 50% from the group presentation and 50% from the individual paper. Students were given the opportunity to revise individual papers for a higher grade. Many students at the university do not possess strong writing skills, and an incentive to improve a paper ensured students considered editorial comments and corrected mistakes. The instructor wanted papers to be a reflection of students' best work because papers would be compiled into a booklet and presented to informants as a thank you for participating.

Desired Outcomes for Learners

Through completing this learning activity, students should have achieved the following outcomes: Connected local history to course content, learned to conduct an interview, and learned to identify domains and find examples to explain them. Papers, presentations, and class discussion revealed a thorough understanding of the domains students identified. Students learned how important church was in the lives of respondents; in fact one respondent recalled pretending to be in church with friends as a child. Respondents taught students about the importance of education; for many of the respondents or people they knew, going to college was a privilege. All respondents came from farming families, and their help was needed to maintain the farm. Some continued to help their families on the farm while attending college. All respondents remembered the university being very small. One respondent recalled that, in the late 1930s, there were 30-40 students per academic year, and all students legally were required to be American Indians from the county. Another individual who attended the university in the late 1960s recalled the university composition as approximately 400 American Indian students, 200 white/Caucasian students, and one black/African American student. In each interview respondents remembered tuition being very inexpensive by current standards. One respondent told students he paid \$87 per semester to attend the university. Finally, interviewees discussed changes in technology, including class format and modes of communication.

In addition, students learned that they were very similar to their predecessors at the institution. For instance, a male informant told a group of male students that while in college he liked to chase women. Other students noted that they bore similarities to their respondents due to love of family, participation in college activities like intramurals, and shared beliefs.

One unanticipated outcome emerged as well. For the remainder of the semester, students referenced informants as the class discussed issues including segregation, effect of age on leisure preferences, and effect of sex on leisure opportunities. The examples cited by students were more powerful than anything derived from a textbook, especially with respect to segregation. All students in the course grew up in an integrated society and could not grasp fully the implications of segregation for daily leisure and recreation activities until they completed the project. Respondents spoke of: segregated high schools and colleges; restrictions placed on persons of color in the military; and movie theaters with separate seating, restrooms, and concessions for white, black, and American Indian patrons.

Recommendations for Use by Others

In order to implement this learning activity, three recommendations should be considered. First, informants with a connection to the college or /university the students attend will pique student interest in the study. Students are curious about what their campus was like in the past and want to know how the college experience has changed. In addition, informants who attended or worked for the university will be more likely to allow students to interview them. Selecting informants for the class guaranteed these came from a bounded population, as is needed to complete an ethnography (Spradley, 1979). If an instructor allows each student to select an informant, students without elder family members or friends or local connections are placed at a great disadvantage in identifying an interviewee. The selection process undertaken in this activity ensured that no student was placed in this position. Adding an individual component to the learning activity also is recommended, so students do not feel that their grades are determined by others or that group members are not being penalized for failure to contribute to the group's assignment.

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