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GIFTS: “Stepping Out of My Comfort Zone!” Learning Intercultural Communication through an Ethnographic Project

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As a means of enhancing students’ intercultural communication competence, as well as applying key concepts of intercultural communication, this activity used an ethnographic approach in order to make students appreciate various ways people differ from each other. Specifically, through observation, participation, and interview, students immersed themselves in a culture that was different from their own, and attempted to understand that culture. Students reported that they stepped out of their comfort zones during this project, which opened their eyes to a different culture. In addition, this activity incorporated topics learned throughout the semester, which consolidated students’ understanding of the course content.

Pedagogical Rationale

This Great Idea For Teachers was implemented in a semester-long Intercultural Communication course. This course studies communication within and between cultures, and the importance of developing one's ability to communicate effectively with people from diverse cultures and co-cultures. In addition, this course is about personal growth, social responsibility, world-mindedness, as well as appreciating various ways people differ from each other. This project aims to apply key concepts learned throughout the semester. It also intends to enhance students’ intercultural communication skills and appreciation.

Procedure

This is a semester long project. It is strongly recommended that the instructor start the project as early as possible in the semester.

Two students pair up to explore each other’s unique culture that is different from his/her own. For example, Student A is a part-time nanny, and Student B works for a punk band in her spare time. A and B decide to enter each other’s world that they normally will not think of entering. After the instructor approves their topics, A introduces B to her nanny field and B introduces A to her band activities. Through peer introduction, students gain access to, and immerse in, different cultures, and attempt to understand those cultures through participation, observation, and interview.

A complete research experience includes the following six steps:

- 1) **Topic report.** Each student will write a brief report on his or her choice of topic, detailing his/her plan as a participant, an observer, and an interviewer. The instructor will provide timely feedback.

A list of research topics that my students have examined:

- Religions: Greek Orthodox, Catholicism, Judaism
- Immigration Cultures: Nigerian, Italian, Russian, Indian, Dominican
- Professions: female band manager, nanny, waitress, department store staff
- Subcultures: hip-hop, underground music, Amish, meditation
- Non-profit organizations: Habitat for Humanity
- Student organizations: Greek Life, college orchestra, athletic teams (crew, track and field, basketball, volleyball), dance teams, All College Theater, international students, student government, college union board
- Offices on campus: Title IX office, mailroom, Bonner Center for Civic Engagement

- 2) **Fieldwork.** Before students start fieldwork, the instructor should give a lecture on research methods and ethics training. A good source to use is Goodall (2000).

Students are required to go to the field at least three times. In order to find recurring patterns, each time they are required to spend at least one hour in the field. In addition, they are asked to conduct in-depth interviews with at least two people and each interview should last at least 30 minutes.

- 3) **Field notes, journal entries and interview transcripts.** For each field visit, students will write a journal entry based on their field notes that documents what gets done in everyday life of the people in the field. Specifically, the journal entry should include verbal exchanges, nonverbal performances, and arrays of practices.

For conversations, students should determine the type of communication, which include:

- *Phatic communication* (ritual interaction)
- *Ordinary conversation* (discussion, gossip, information exchange)
- *Skilled conversation* (conflict management, argumentation, debate, negotiation, interviews)
- *Personal narratives* (self-disclosure)
- *Dialogues* (the talk moves from exchanges of information to a higher level of spontaneous mutuality)

After coding the conversations, students should reflect on the meaning of the conversations. They are also required to document a variety of practices/cultural performances:

- *Routines*: what people do everyday.
- *Rituals*: what people do everyday that counts as particularly and symbolically meaningful.

- *Rites of passage*: what people do that significantly alters or changes their personal sense of self or their social or professional status or identity.

For each interview, students will write a summary in a narrative format (not a straight question-and-answer format).

- 4) **Individual meeting with the instructor.** Two to three weeks after the fieldwork has started, students should sign up for a session (either in class or during office hours) to meet with the instructor one-on-one about the progress of their projects. This step proves to be very important, as the instructor can discover any problems with the project early on and provide advice in a timely fashion. Some students may be overconfident and do not think the consultation is necessary. The instructor should strongly encourage, if not require, the students to meet with him/her.
- 5) **Oral presentation.** After journal entries and interview transcripts are submitted, each student will share their fieldwork experiences through a 13-15 minute oral presentation in the class, followed by a 5-7 minute Questions & Answers. Specifically, the student will tell stories about interesting scenes, activities, and conversations, as well as discussing surprising findings. Proper visual aids are required. The Q&A is indispensable, as the students receive valuable feedback from the class.
- 6) **Written report.** Students will write a final report detailing cultural patterns and meanings they find as well as reflecting on their experiences as researchers. The instructor should take the initiative to explain that a final report is vastly different from journal entries and interview transcripts in that it uses and organizes examples and evidence from the notes. This will dispel the confusion some students may have that the written report overlaps with the journal entries and the interview transcripts.

Typical Results

Students greatly enjoyed and benefited from the project. First and foremost, this project gave students an opportunity to go outside their comfort zones and learn about a culture that they would not have thought of learning if it were not for this project.

For example, coming from an Irish culture that values personal space, a student who studied Greek Orthodox culture immediately noticed that people at the mass approached the altar in large groups and all kissed the same icons, in addition to kissing one another, including herself, a person they had only just met. She was overwhelmed by the lack of personal space, but she eventually adjusted to the collectivist culture. The feeling of inclusion allowed her to engage herself fully into the culture and feel like she was part of a big “family.”

Another student immersed herself in a Greek organization on campus. As someone who was not a member of the Greek life community, she found that while many of the heavily rooted traditions and rituals were kept secret, the Greek organization she explored put exceptionally strong emphasis and value on intimacy, respect, friendship, and camaraderie. She concluded that Greek life is a complex culture that deserves to be

appreciated in its own right and, unlike many popular stereotypes, this culture actually promotes quite positive values among its members.

Here are some quotes from my students regarding opening up to a new culture and group of people:

- “Experienced a culture outside my own!”
- “Opened my eyes to a new perspective.”
- “Opportunity to explore a different culture.”
- “Experiencing a classmate’s culture in a different light.”
- “An excellent way of getting to know a different culture.”

In addition, this project made students compare and contrast their classmates’ identities and their own. As one student said: “I really liked learning about this part of (my partner's) life and how important music is to her personal identity... She inherited her taste in underground music from her parents, just by them playing it around her... In a similar way, I inherited my parent's Indian culture just by being around them. This connection was very interesting. We were exposed to the cultures by our parents and influenced by them.” This kind of connection can be really powerful not only to students’ learning but also to their social and emotional wellbeing.

Not only that, students learned how difficult, challenging, and time-consuming it is to fully study and appreciate a culture other than their own. As one student put it: “I have learned that investigating and immersing oneself into another culture requires a lot of patience and understanding, and I am grateful for the experience.”

Students also became more observant in life. When passing by a bulletin board on campus, one student who was studying Student Government noticed that people who supported one candidate for President ripped down a poster supporting another. She said that in the past she would not have been so attentive to these actions.

Other benefits of this project included making students apply many concepts learned in the class. Below are a few quotes from my students.

- “I really enjoyed this project. I thought it was a great opportunity to basically utilize all lessons in the book into one assignment.”
- “Learned much; was able to incorporate topics learned throughout the semester.”

Last but not least, this project brought novelty and fun into learning. One student who studied underground music culture said: “When your class project is to go to a concert, thumbs up!”

Future Improvements

First, some students wished that they could find their own informants instead of partnering with a classmate. One student said: “It would have been better if students could have researched a friend’s culture or simply just the culture of another person on campus.” In my experience, unless there are difficulties pairing up, partnering with a classmate almost always produced better projects than working alone. Therefore, if the class is diversified in culture, the instructor should strongly encourage finding partners within the class. If the class is very similar in cultural backgrounds, it makes more sense to use outsiders.

Second, instructors should be aware that this project requires a big time commitment. Some complaints included how time consuming it was and difficulties in meeting informants because of conflicting schedules. Therefore, this project should start early in the semester to allow sufficient time for fieldwork and interviews.

Third, it cannot be emphasized enough that the instructor should be aware how every project is going. Constant feedback helps uncover potential problems as early as possible.

Conclusion:

While it takes lots of time and effort, this ethnographic project is worth doing from the instructor's perspective, and it is rewarding, fulfilling and enlightening from a student's perspective. It is safe to say that the more time and effort a student dedicates to this project, the more positive feelings he/she has. This project forces students to step out of their comfort zones and open themselves up to new cultures, improves their intercultural communication skills, and makes them see their own cultures in a new light. As one student summarized it well: “This experience opened my eyes to the possibility of experiencing others’ cultures and religions. The importance of understanding another person’s background is especially important to the rest of my life.”

References

Goodall, H. L. Jr. (2000). *Writing the new ethnography*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.