Journal of Information Literacy

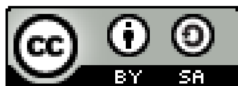
ISSN 1750-5968

Volume 9 Issue 2
December 2015

Article

Pashia, A. and Critten, J. 2015. Ethnography as pedagogy in library orientations. *Journal of Information Literacy*, 9(2), pp. 84-93.

http://dx.doi.org/10.11645/9.2.2028



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Ethnography as pedagogy in library orientations

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Abstract

Driven by a need to make their library orientations more meaningful, a group of academic librarians used ethnography as a pedagogy to create a series of exercises based on participant observation and reflection. This article describes the value of ethnographic methodology in information literacy (IL) curriculum design, focusing specifically on a case study in which students completed a mapping and observation exercise in a freshman seminar course as their library tour. This assignment was more successful than a previous, more traditional approach to the freshman seminar in which the librarian pointed out elements of the space and then guided students through a subscription database. The new ethnographic approach gave students the opportunity to be critically reflective about how they interacted with their surroundings and also extrapolate what function certain areas of the library space might serve from their experiences.

Keywords

ethnography, library orientations, information literacy, pedagogy, USA, critical information literacy, mapping

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1.Introduction

As instruction librarians at the University of West Georgia, a medium-sized regional comprehensive university, our mission is to teach and advocate for information literacy (IL) on our campus. IL is traditionally defined as the ability to find, evaluate, and ethically use information, but that seemingly simple definition belies the ways in which our interactions with information are fundamentally political, personal, and ever-shifting.

The emerging field of critical IL recognises these dimensions, and advocates that librarians eschew what critical pedagogue Paulo Freire (1970) has called the "banking concept of education" in order to create more meaningful and transformative learning experiences for students. In the banking model, it is assumed that students know nothing and are therefore passive receptacles for information. Students do not participate in the learning process; they are expected to simply listen and comply with the teacher's demands. Freire argues that instead, the student should learn through dialogue with her instructor, as well as through discovery and reflection. We recognised that much of our traditional instructional curriculum fell within this

banking concept of education and so we sought new ways to make learning more impactful for students. We found that especially paradigmatic instructional models like one-shots and orientations did not allow for extended interaction or meaningful relationship-building. In particular, we identified an acute need to revise our curriculum for UWG 1101, the university's freshman seminar. Our sessions for this course were ostensibly the students' library orientation and our traditional curriculum very much fell within the banking model of education. We wanted to create a critical introduction to the library space for students that allowed them to, as Elmborg (2006) writes, "read, interpret and produce 'texts'" within their new-found academic (if not yet disciplinary) community.

One of the authors has an academic background in anthropology and brought an understanding of ethnographic methods to our curriculum redesign. Ethnography is not new to the library sphere, but has been traditionally explored more as a means of assessment instead of a teaching tool. We decided to design new assignments using ethnographic methodology, specifically participant observation, as a way that students could engage in the function of the library space in a more active and personally meaningful way. In the process of observing and visualising a space (and themselves within that space), we hoped to give students the opportunity to be critically reflective about how they interacted with their surroundings and also extrapolate from their experiences what function certain areas of the library space might serve. In other words, our assignment redesign was meant to let students articulate the space based on their own understandings of it, thereby creating an opportunity for the process of interpretation and personal meaning-making that is at the heart of critical IL. This article will make an argument for ethnography-as-pedagogy in libraries, and as a case study will outline the ways we used ethnography to create a more critical and meaningful library orientation for undergraduate students.

2. Introducing an ethnographic framework

When we talk about ethnographic methods we are referring to a range of methods scholars have used to learn about cultural practices. Broken down, ethnography is the practice of *writing* (-graphy) *culture* (ethno-). In this methodology, participant observation is central. It is not sufficient to stand back and watch from the sidelines, one must actively participate to get the full sense of what is taking place. Anthropologists combine this with other methods, including in-depth interviews with key informants and shorter surveys of a larger number of people, both of which may confirm or correct the anthropologist's earlier interpretations of their observations. Quantitative methods, like counting the number of people who participate in a certain activity each day, can help to enrich the anthropologist's understanding of events and lead to more interview questions. Mapping can be a useful method for collecting information when your question involves the way people use a particular space, whether that means zones for different types of transactions in a market or zones for different types of study habits in a library.

The purpose of ethnographic research is to provide a rich understanding of a specific context. While comparative studies can find some commonalities, ethnographies provide situated knowledge specific to the local culture, but also influenced by the personalities involved in the interactions. Even things that are considered to be universals "are indeed local knowledge in the sense that they cannot be understood without the benefit of historically specific cultural assumptions" (Tsing 2005, p.7). Characteristics of the ethnographer will also affect the way they interact with informants, limit what information they have access to, and colour their interpretations. One example of this from anthropological literature is Annette Weiner's (1988) research revisiting the Trobriand Island culture that Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) was famous for

studying. As a woman, she learned about a whole set of traditions that would have been very difficult for a male ethnographer to access.

Over the years, ethnographic methods have been adopted by researchers in other fields to gain a more complete sense of authentic behaviour. Surveys and interviews can serve as important sources of information, but self-reported information has often been found to be inaccurate. One of the popular examples of this used in introductory anthropology courses is commonly referred to as the Tucson garbage study. Among other components, researchers surveyed residents of a neighbourhood about their alcohol consumption patterns while also observing residents' garbage. They found that residents consistently under-reported the amount of alcohol consumed (Rathje and Murphy 1992). By this same token, if we survey undergraduate students about their library use or research habits, we can expect responses that may not accurately reflect their actual behaviour. It does not matter whether the informants are lying to themselves or to the researcher, ethnographic methods can help illuminate the actual behavior of a given population.

Asking students to turn this lens around to understand their own culture can be a useful way of encouraging critical thought. Ethnography "makes the familiar strange, the exotic quotidian" (Clifford 1986). One of the classic articles commonly used in introductory anthropology courses is "Body ritual among the Nacirema," which exoticised American culture by describing it in the same writing style anthropologists of the time commonly used to describe other cultures. For example, it describes brushing one's teeth as a "ritual [that] consists of inserting a small bundle of hog hairs into the mouth, along with certain magical powders, and then moving the bundle in a highly formalised series of gestures" (Miner 1956, p. 504). This article has been used to critique the Othering of other cultures while encouraging students to approach their own culture more critically. Anthropologists continue to engage with this approach, as indicated by the theme of the 2015 American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, which notes the ways it can “denaturalise taken-for-granted frames and expand the horizons of students” when used well (American Anthropological Association 2015).

Other fields have explored the adoption of ethnographic research as a pedagogical method to engage student learners in more reflective practice. Kutz (1990) describes the use of ethnographic research to frame learning in a freshman studies seminar. This semester-long framework "enabled [students] to become active learners and to carry out real inquiry in a collaborative way" (p. 347). Through this active engagement, students developed both "personal and critical authority" (p. 347); it created a framework in which students constructed their own knowledge, became active participants in scholarly discourse, and thereby gained the confidence to question the status quo and critically evaluate other sources of information.

Applying this anthropological framework to library orientations connects us to an interactive, constructivist tradition. People learn the norms and taboos of their culture by observing peers and mentors and through practice, "not by absorbing concepts in the abstract" (Hawkins 2014, p. 553). Several ethnographic studies, going back to the 1960s, have shown that scientists do not generally learn to think and act like scientists by reading or by listening lectures; they learn these habits of mind by practising in the lab (Hawkins 2014, p. 552). Librarians seem to have accepted this understanding of learning by doing, as shown by the emphasis on constructivist learning in, among other places, the Teacher Track of the ACRL IL Immersion Programme. Asking first-semester freshmen to observe the authentic activities of other students, and then describe how they would (or currently do) participate in using that space as their self-guided "tour" of the library encourages this active engagement with the space and learning norms from more experienced students.

3. Ethnography in libraries

Many of the applications of ethnographic methods in the library literature have been for the purpose of tailoring or assessing services. Dent-Goodman (2011) argues that ethnographic research has been happening in libraries for a century, with many of the early works categorised as community analysis studies. This research had the explicit goal of learning more about the community that library served in order to "improve the library's outreach and services" (p. 3).

More recently, there have been several prominent studies done by academic libraries that employed ethnographic methods to learn more about students' research habits. Foster and Gibbons (2007) led a major study at the University of Rochester that is often cited as the inspiration for later ethnographic studies in libraries (see Delcore et al. 2009, Au et al. 2009). They did a significant amount of research and produced a book examining the relationships between students, faculty expectations, and library services. In one chapter, they examined faculty expectations about student research in order to help them better support students in meeting those expectations. Researchers gathered evidence about how students authentically perform research, their perceptions of the library, and their daily activities in order to identify gaps in services. They also sought input on how to redesign the library and the library's website. Chapter 7, *Mapping Diaries, or Where Do They Go All Day?* asked students to complete a mapping exercise, but the purpose was, again, to gather information for librarians to use in assessing their services, as students reported on their movements around campus on an average day.

Ethnographic research necessarily focuses on the local culture, so the results are highly-situated. What is true of a mostly residential, majority white, private university in the north-eastern US may not hold true for a mostly commuter, highly diverse, public university with twice as many students in a different geographic region (Delcore et al. 2009). Therefore, several studies have adapted ethnographic methods to learn more about the behaviours of students in different settings. The Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries (ERIAL) project is a large-scale attempt to account for some of this variation by including five different Illinois universities representing a range of sizes and demographic characteristics.

The use of ethnographic methods to learn about how students authentically use the library and interact with research has provided a wealth of information about how to provide more appropriate support for students. As noted above, self-reported information on surveys and questionnaires is often inaccurate, whether due to a person misremembering details or wishing to present a 'better' image. This more authentic assessment of student behaviour has enabled librarians to make better-informed decisions about library services and design. However, as instructional services librarians, the authors seek to expand the use of ethnographic methods in libraries to support student learning through pedagogy, in addition to library assessment.

While these prominent studies have focused on learning about students' habits in order to develop or assess services, some have included students as researchers. Hunter and Ward (2011) note that "when students conduct ethnographic research of their peers, we create opportunities for students to reflect on their own behaviours" (p. 264-5). Having a framework in which to examine one's own culture from a different perspective can lead to critical questions about *why* one does things in a particular way.

4. Library orientation as guided focus group: “Visualise the library”

When the authors started at the University of West Georgia there was already a standardised assignment for the freshman orientation courses in place: When possible, a librarian would meet the class in the entrance lobby of the library and lead a five-minute tour on the way to the classroom in which they would point to places like the circulation desk and the reference help desks. Once in the classroom, students completed an icebreaker exercise in which they tried to work with their fellow students to answer a list of questions about the library (how many books does the library have? How can you access a book we don’t physically have in the library?) before the librarian went over the correct answers. On the other side of this worksheet was an exercise that asked students to compare Google and Academic Search Complete.

This lesson plan attempted to incorporate active learning strategies. The purpose of the icebreaker exercise was to give students an opportunity to engage their pre-existing knowledge and share that with their peers. Yet, in practice, the authors found two problems with this approach: First, starting the session with a passive learning experience – the librarian-led ‘pointing’ tour – set the tone for students to either wait for information to come to them or not engage at all. Second, students who did actively participate in the icebreaker exercise were simply attempting to get ‘the right answer’ to a list of questions; instead of critically engaging their curiosity, they were competing in a trivia game.

The final exercise, comparing google to Academic Search Complete, was also problematic. 20 to 30 minutes now seems inadequate to get students into a database for the first time, allow them time to search, and hope for them to compare the two resources. Also, students did not have a research assignment associated with the course so they were not able to immediately put the new information they were learning into meaningful practice.

The instructional services librarians knew they had to revise this assignment to be more pedagogically sound and also to respond to the unsustainability of their previous approach with regard to librarian time. One of the authors broke with protocol in the summer of 2012 for several sections of the course. Instead of doing the passive tour, she met the students in a classroom on the third floor of the library and asked them to draw a map of the library on large whiteboards without any prior specific preparation. At the beginning of each class, a volunteer was given a marker and asked to draw what they saw in the library as they walked to the library session. In these drawings, students would usually start from one of the library’s two main entrances and describe the library as a directional map. In describing their path to the classroom, students were also asked to reflect upon their affective experience of the library space.

Here is an example of how this map might evolve: The student might start by drawing a door on the whiteboard to represent the entrance to the library they used, which was near the library Starbucks. Then, she might add commentary about how she wished she had left enough time to grab a coffee before class. She would then draw a line representing the path she took into the library proper, and use an ‘x’ to indicate where the group study areas were on her left, and the movable furniture in a study area on her right. As she progressed through the library, she would note the books that lined the wall on her left and the student computers on the right. Eventually the line that represented where she walked would lead to a drawing of an elevator, and a big circle representing the check-out desk.

This visualisation exercise indicated what was (perhaps superficially) most important to students as they walked through the space, and also the potentially important things they did not notice. As they spoke about the path they took, the instructor could prompt other students in the class to fill in any gaps, or add more information about things the students did catch; ("Did you notice there were two reference desks, not just one? There are students working at those desks whenever the library is open.") Not only could students engage with the library in ways that allowed them to construct personal meanings of each element of the space, 'creating' the library together as a class also allowed for real-time formative assessment. It was clear what students already knew about the library and what areas were confusing to them. Instead of glossing over the whole space quickly and superficially, more time could be spent exploring its function.

Eliciting this sort of thick description of a space that students use (or at least pass through) is a sort of in-depth group interview. An ethnographer might use this to gather information about how students conceive of that space. Gibbons and Foster (2007) used a similar method in workshops, asking students to draw their ideal libraries, in order to help inform their library renovation (p. 22). In a teaching scenario, however, information about student conceptions of library spaces helps address misconceptions and gaps in knowledge. Asking why they have those impressions, why they did or did not notice features, and why things are arranged as they are can also encourage critical reflection about the space those students were already familiar with to varying degrees.

This exercise generally met the key learning outcomes for this course as the authors strove to engage students in this sort of constructivist exercise and critical discussion. However, the high number of sections of UWG 1101 in a semester ended up taking up a large amount of library faculty time. It was decided that it would be necessary to come up with a way to scale back the time spent in UWG 1101 in order to incorporate more scaffolded instruction in the other classes for which instructional services librarians were responsible. For a library that had the time and/or obligation to do a one-shot session for a freshman seminar, or as an alternative to the normal library tour, the authors can recommend this exercise as a more active and engaged alternative.

4.1 Map the library!

Building on an earlier idea, and ideas from other libraries (Noe 2009), the authors developed a standard mapping exercise that asked students to actively explore and critically interact with the library. One of the authors created blank maps of the various floors of the library and listed a set of features students should label on the maps, including things like stairs, bathrooms, and reference desks. This standardisation sacrificed some of the critical discussion found in the earlier exercise. However, a requirement that students observe three people (or groups of people) on each floor and describe what those people were doing in those spaces was added. The authors asked students to reflect on how they could see themselves using different spaces on each floor. The majority of students identified places they might quietly study, or study with groups. Some students noted that they passed by books in the stacks that they wanted to read. Several students also noted behaviour that seemed to be in violation of explicitly-stated rules, or at least rules they found implicit based on their preconceptions of the role libraries were supposed to serve. For example, students noted that people were talking in the library, which clashed with their conceptions of the library as a sacred, silent space. Many people were surprised that students could eat and drink in the library, some expressing displeasure with the mess they perceived those students to be making.

Developing an assignment like this meant giving up control. Students engaged in their own ways; some explored the library, walking around to find the items on the list. Other students realised that completed maps were included in the rotation of images on digital displays, and so just waited for the map to come around to the screen. We could choose to view this in pejorative terms that the students were lazy or cheating. Instead, the authors saw this as giving students the agency to engage with the information in the way that makes the most sense for them.

Instructional services librarians also teach a semester-long IL course, LIBR 1101. Results for the mapping and visualisation exercise were mixed when used in this course. Certainly there were students who appeared not to have significantly engaged with the library space, providing vague and superficial responses to the questions about observations and how they would use the space. As much as this could indicate that the assignment needed further refinement, it might also signal that there was simply not anything in the library space that resonated with students. In future versions of the assignment, the authors will make use of the extended time with these students to further interrogate what this apparent lack of commitment to the assignment might signify.

That said, there were also many students who provided thoughtful responses and demonstrated engagement by asking questions about why certain areas of the library were located where they were, and why they might want to use one space or resource over another. They also challenged what they perceived as misuses of space and incongruous decoration ("Why is there a piano on the quiet floor?") Often, these variations in engagement were in line with those students' engagement on other assignments – so the high-performing students, on average, engaged more critically with the space.

However, this sort of assignment created an opportunity to engage those students who are disengaged because of the banking system of education. When most of their classes attempt to only to passively deposit knowledge into their brains, it is rational for students to feel like they need to only minimally meet the requirements of the assignment. Asking students to articulate the space as they encounter it puts them in the subject, as opposed to the object, position. Additionally, this assignment provided an opening to build relationships with lower-performing students who were seen wandering around, looking confused while trying to complete the assignment. This did not always lead to greater engagement in other class activities, but in at least one case, discussions about this project led to greater understanding: of course the student working two jobs totaling 60+ hours per week had difficulty keeping up with classes.

This approach explicitly positioned the student as an ethnographer; wherein the earlier iteration of the assignment students were only asked to reflect on their cursory interactions with the space, here they were asked to consciously observe the space and the people using it and synthesise the information they gathered. If the earlier version included students as interviewees or informants in a group interview facilitated by the librarian, this later version put the student in the researcher role, deciding what behaviours are significant enough to record, and decoding the norms of each area in order to envision how they might (or might not) want to use that space.

While arguing for the need for more guided training in ethnographic fieldwork for anthropology students, Hawkins (2014) notes that in such structured programs, the "the learner - the apprentice - has been granted a legitimated social status to learn through participation in a legitimate, real project within the community of practice" (p. 568). Though we are not training students to become sociocultural anthropologists, interacting with an unfamiliar space for the purpose of describing it for a structured assignment can lead to a different level of observations

than one may ordinarily make. When one of the authors volunteered at a soup kitchen for the purposes of doing participant observation for an ethnographic methods course in her undergraduate studies, she approached the space very differently than an ordinary volunteer. She was there to learn about the lives of the people who spent time there, not just to help out with meal preparation. By that token, we hope that asking students to explore the library from an ethnographic perspective, with the structure of an assignment, will encourage them to pay more attention to their peripheral vision than they would if they were simply there to check out a book.

5. Conclusions

The authors found the approach of using ethnography as pedagogy rewarding and engaging, but it came with some challenges. As with many critical pedagogies and constructivist approaches, it required giving up a degree of control. Students may not always get the 'right' answer. If they observe one person talking on a cell phone and lively participation in a group activity in the (not sound-proofed) classroom on the quiet floor, then they may draw conclusions about how best or most appropriately to use the space that are contrary to what is hoped they might find. However, these observations can be used to open conversations about why actual behaviour does not always conform to suggested norms, or about why there is a classroom on the quiet floor.

There has also been some resistance from instructors who wanted librarians to provide 'traditional' library instruction in UWG 1101, which includes introducing students to the library databases. The authors have been able to clearly articulate the pedagogical rationale for why the ethnography assignment is more appropriate for a library orientation and this has gone a long way to sway UWG 1101 instructors. Also, the authors are fortunate to have support from library administration to resist pressure to offer pedagogically problematic library instruction sessions.

Removing the introduction to databases from our UWG 1101 curriculum has meant that this component has, appropriately, shifted to other classes. Often our students are not required to use scholarly peer-reviewed articles until they are in courses in their majors. Therefore, no shared, standardised assignment to apply ethnographic methods to database instruction has been created, as each librarian has autonomy to design their own lessons for working with courses in their liaison departments. This may be an area for further investigation.

However, ethnographic methods may be applied in areas of library instruction beyond the orientation. For example, in our credit-bearing IL course (LIBR 1101), one of the authors assigns participant observation as a means of learning to search the library catalogue and use Library of Congress call numbers to physically retrieve books. Students are required to document the process used as well as the questions asked and the explanations their informants offer. In an honours section of LIBR 1101, students were also required to do a more in-depth interview about their informant's experiences with libraries. This approach uses peer learning to introduce the student to the catalogue and call numbers, but is framed as participant observation in order to encourage students to be more critical about *why* their peer uses the methods shown.

Increasingly, libraries and library instruction programmes are asked to respond to evidence-based practices which determine value based on straightforward data. The authors' findings are anecdotal, as the intended outcome of these assignments is not easily quantifiable. Coding the observations to create quantitative data would obscure the instances of critical examination of

library spaces. The authors knew that data was not going to be the appropriate measure for this kind of assignment, which was meant to be a space for personal reflection and a starting point for a relationship with the library and research that would evolve over time and in response to shifting needs. Because of this, ethnography was an especially useful framework for assignment redesign as it served as both the learning object and, as an oft-used method for qualitative assessment, a site for immediate, formative feedback.

An ethnographic approach to library orientations has been a valuable addition to our increasingly critically-focused IL curriculum. Not only has it allowed librarian to be more economical with librarian time, students became able to make more personal and resonant meaning of library spaces through their reflections and observations. The authors believe that positioning students as ethnographers empowers them to be more active and thoughtful participants in the learning process.

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