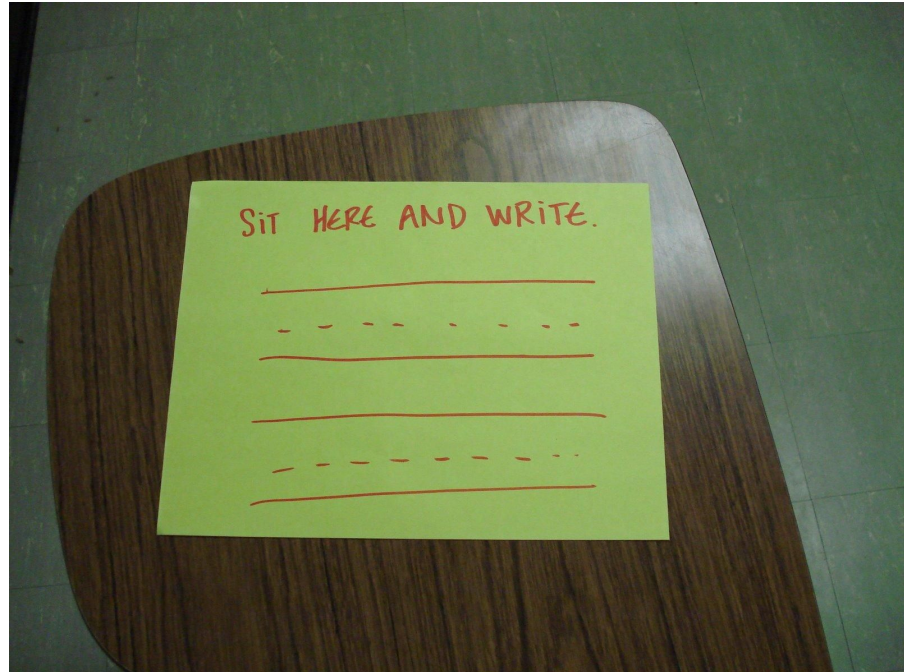


Classroom Activity

Spatial &
Activity-Based
Ethnography of
Classroom Design

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This is an activity designed for university-level students interested in classroom design. It could work for a course that focuses specifically on classroom design (probably for student interested in careers in teaching), but it could also be adapted to courses where the instructor wants students to think about how classroom spaces and technologies affect learning. For example, instructors in history, literature, or composition studies could all adapt this assignment to be part of an ongoing discussion of the spaces/technologies of learning in classes where there is a subject-focus in any of these areas.

Preparation: There are several readings that students could do to help them prepare for this kind of activity. Instructors (depending on how deeply they want to explore the topic) could assign all or just a few readings from the following categories.

Readings on Ethnography:

- Projects from the spatial ethnography lab: <http://www.se-l.net/>

- Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes – Robert M. Emerson, University of Chicago Press, Published 1995.
<http://www.pacificdiscovery.org/credit/SEReadings/Robert%20et.al.%20-%20Writing%20Ethnographic%20Fieldnotes.pdf>
- Writing Live Fieldnotes: Towards a More Open Ethnography:
<http://ethnographymatters.net/2012/08/02/writing-live-fieldnotes-towards-a-more-open-ethnography/>
- Ethnography for Teacher Education (an article): <http://www.sagepub.com/drewstudy/pdf/Frank.pdf>
- Ethnography as Epistemology: An Introduction to Educational Ethnography:
http://www.academia.edu/1014039/Ethnography_as_epistemology_An_introduction_to_educational_ethnography
- Ethnography in Education (an article):
http://www.researchgate.net/publication/250926888_Ethnography_and_ethnographers_of_and_in_Education
- Examples of Classroom Ethnographies <https://ucsb.academia.edu/JudithGreen>
- Doing Classroom Ethnographies:
<https://education.ucf.edu/mirc/docs/pp/FLaRE%20Professional%20Paper%20-%20Ethnographic%20Research.pdf>

Readings Classroom Space Design

- Stephen Heppell discussing the evolution of physical classroom spaces:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kemWMuaHjBs>
- Ewan McIntosh discussing Seven spaces of technology in school environments:
<https://vimeo.com/15945912>

Readings on Activity Theory:

[NOTE: The point of these videos is to help introduce students to the idea of cultural-historical activity theory, which can help them to see how paying attention to the inter-relations of people, texts, tools, intentions, memories, etc. can shape how we see the world, and how we understand how all of these elements interact in different spaces.]

- The Word Bird. "Activity Theory: Because Things Are Actors Too." YouTube. YouTube, 20 Aug. 2014. Web. 19 Feb. 2016.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mb-3ufwK6U0>(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mb-3ufwK6U0>)
- Wright-Dottore, Michelle. "CHAT: How Sweet It Is! Mapping Out the Activity of Writing." YouTube. The Illinois State University Writing Program, 10 Nov. 2015. Web. 19 Feb. 2016.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MJya9zQoMuw>
- Engstrom's Activity Theory: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jP2v6pzhCQw>

The Activities

In a spatial & activity-based classroom ethnography, we're looking at three separate but deeply connected things: (1) The physical/conceptual nature of a particular space, (2) How the activities of the space are organized through the interactions of tools, texts, and people, and (3) How ideas and learning (as activities) happen through interactions between people, tools, texts and spaces.

Steps in the Activity

1. **Do the Readings:** The readings above can help you to prepare for this activity!
2. **Pick a space to study:** Because we are trying to think about learning more broadly, the location of your ethnography simply needs to be some space where learning is happening, and where you'll be allowed to observe (perhaps more than once) people doing things in that space.
 - For example, you might pick a classroom space -- one where you are already enrolled as a student. You'll want to let the instructor know about the project, but basically you can observe the space as you participate in it.
 - You might also decide to study an online learning space, but it should be one where you can study people interacting. You want to be able to seeing people engaged in learning, not just look at resources for learning (like training videos).
 - Workplace situations where training happens might also be good sites for this project.
 - Non-school social learning -- sports? Cooking? Crafting? Music? Any human activity where people are learning to do something they don't know how to do could be a possible choice.
3. **Get Permission:** We are doing this project informally, for class, but you still need to let the people in the space know that you are observing it. So get permission from the instructor (if there is one) or let the people in the space know you want to study it (and that you won't take any photos or record anything with express permission).
4. **How Many/How Much Observation(s)?** This is an open part of the project, because it depends on the environment you are studying. But you'll need to decide how much "data" you'll need to gather in order to say something interesting about the learning going on in this location. You'll need to justify that the time you spent was appropriate.
5. **How will you take notes?** We're not going to be video or audiotaping (unless you are doing interviews as part of your activity), so you'll need to come up with a system for taking notes. Think about the kind of note-taking your site might allow/require and come up with a specific plan (you'll also need to justify your decisions here as well).
6. Do the Observing.
7. **Create a usable version of your notes:** As soon as you are finished with each observing session, make sure to go over your notes and add anything you can think of that you missed recording -- it's critical that you do this soon after the observing session, or you'll forget!
8. **Make your visual map of the space:** Draw a physical map of the space -- or take photographs. You'll need to provide an explanation of the physical space, not just the map or pictures.
9. **Activity Diagrams:** Choose 2 different activities that happen in the space and draw a diagram that explains the people, tools, texts, (and interactions between them) that happen in the space.
10. **Create your Report:** Your report should have 5 sections:
 - **Overview/method:** Describe the location and the kind of learning that you are observing. Give detailed explanations of and justifications for (1) why you selected the site, (2) How you organized and completed your observations.
 - **Summary of your Notes:** Using specific excerpts from your notes (yes, you'll be citing yourself), explain what you found most significant in your observations. What tools, people, activities, environmental objects did you notice the most, and why.
 - **Your Visual Map** (plus explanation)
 - **Your Activity Diagrams** (plus explanations)
 - **Analysis of Learning:** This is an important section! Provide an explanation of what you saw as significant in terms of learning -- when was it happening (or not)? What tools were used? What interactions happened?

Class Discussions and Activities

There are several kinds of in-class discussions and activities that might be useful for students as they work through this assignment.

- Obviously, discussion of the readings will be important, but helping students move through the readings and understand the goals of the project (what you expect them to learn) will be valuable.
- If the assignment is being used as part of a “content” class, then the learning sites can be tailored to the topic. For example, students could look how local history is taught through lectures at a library or community center; students studying literacy could look at locations where texts are being produced. Students in children’s literature might study a reading day at a local library.
- Class discussion of how to “take notes” during observations can be critical. Students who haven’t done this kind of project often struggle to take good notes, so practicing this activity in class can help.
- Making activity maps (showing how people, texts, tools, environments interact). This could be done by asking students in class to engage in a learning activity, while other students in the class observe and diagram the activity.