

Running Head: INCREASING AWARENESS OF SELF

Increasing Awareness of Self and Culture through Writing Research

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As teachers, it is important that we provide ESL students with the insights and skills they will need to succeed in classes beyond introductory courses. One way of accomplishing this is by incorporating qualitative research methodologies—narrative research, ethnographic research, and historical research—into our ESL courses, especially writing ones. Through the use of qualitative methodologies, we can cross disciplines, geography, culture, and time to increase student understanding of how their multiple and multimodal literacies are enacted, shaped, and strengthened in their own lives; thus increasing their literacy understanding, literacy skills, and the ability to carry these skills beyond the ESL writing class.

The integration of these methodologies can show the importance of: (1) teaching holistically; (2) addressing the need for students to learn about their own and different cultures; (3) recognizing the many and varied experiences students bring to intensify classroom learning; (4) the role of the community in contributing to education.

These methodologies can also be used to focus students' understanding of their own literacy practices and thus help them contextualize what they are learning to be applicable to their own lives and extend it to gain an understanding of their current educational needs.

Students, as well as teachers, can benefit by conducting their own research using these methodologies, thus learning skills for: (1) interviewing; (2) data collection; (3) evaluating and analyzing—including self-analysis of their role in shaping their literacy; (4) critical thinking; (5) reporting data for different genres.

By including research methodologies in writing classes, new strategies and genres for writing can be introduced and explored. For example, students can use: creative narratives, play/movie scripts, poetry, and journal-writing, CDs, videos, and print and television commercials/advertisements, music, comic strips, *manga* and *anime* (Japanese comics and cartoons) to illustrate their writing and the role that these influences have played in their writing development.

Moreover, by accessing multiple literacies, other disciplines can be included in the research, which can allow students to focus on disciplines and subjects that are of interest to them. One additional benefit includes the decrease in the possibility of plagiarism. Teachers are also able to understand their students and their own communities in greater depth, which, in turn, often leads to better teaching.

Qualitative Research Methodologies

Ethnography and Autoethnography involve experiencing—in person—another person’s experiences by joining them in their natural environment. Where autoethnography is involved, a person evaluates his or her own lived experience in light of social and cultural influences.

Ethnography is a methodology that focuses on researching a specific lived experience by observing and participating in that experience.

Historical research methodology involves examining how conditions, events, and people evolve over time in communities, families, local institutions, and cultural artifacts. Historical research considers the impact of a variety of factors and the complex forces that affect most developments, including literacy development.

Narrative Research involves using stories to inquire about events, feelings, thoughts, and the meaning of a story with another. Narratives attempt to connect individuals with others, develop creativity and critical thought, and transcribe academic research and writing for a larger, public audience. Narrative research recaptures the art of storytelling and draws attention to its important role in sharing knowledge with others. Narrative research can be used in academic courses to analyze the story structures and the process of storytelling, to explore the associations between narratives and society, and to examine spoken, written, and visual narratives that draw on many fields including anthropology, communications, psychology, and sociology.

Life history narratives, also called “the biographical method” (Schwandt, 1997, p. 82) involve delving deeply into an individual life, and, as truthfully as possible, reflecting the

experiences and insights of that individual's life (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995). Life history narrative methodology can be used in any class that uses narrative or focuses on analyzing or producing texts about other people's life experiences.

Specific Assignments that Use Qualitative Methodologies

Literacy/Learning Biographies

Assignment One – Literacy Autobiography. Create a written or pictorial time-line of your education and life, paying specific attention to the memorable and important positive and negative learning experiences. From this timeline, write an autobiography exploring your experiences, beliefs, and attitudes about education and literacy.

Assignment Two – Literacy Biography. Write a literacy biography of someone you know. Be sure to explore the experiences in their lives that have contributed to their beliefs about education. Questions to consider when beginning this project: What people, events, qualities were most influential in shaping this person's literacy development? Which quality or trait proved most troubling and difficult? Which quality or trait was most beneficial?

Assignment Three – Comparison/Contrast of Literacy Biographies. Compare and contrast YOUR literacy autobiography with the biography you wrote about someone else. Compare your experiences with theirs and their beliefs and attitudes about literacy with yours. How are your experiences similar? How do they differ? What have you learned from researching and writing these literacy biographies?

Cultural Biographies

Assignment One - Cultural Narrative. Create a project about your culture. Address the following: (1) What do you know about your own culture? (2) What can you learn from your ancestors and heritage? (3) What traditions construct shared knowledge of your culture? (4) How do

the rhetorical modes used by the narrator differ (if at all) from Western conventions of rhetoric? (5)
 What are the physical representations of your culture (artifacts, food, pictures, music, dance etc.)?

Assignment Two - Ethnographic Interview & Feature Article. This assignment requires an in-depth interview with a person of another culture in order to begin understanding his or her beliefs, life situation, and worldview.

Assignment Three - Rhetorical Cultural Comparison. Observe a movie of a culture other than your own) and compare and contrast the values, cultural norms, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors with your own cultural norms, communication strategies, etc. Some suggestions for movies: *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* (or the Spanish version *Tortilla Soup*), *Chocolat*, *Shall We Dance* (Japanese version), *Joy Luck Club*, *Like Water for Chocolate*, *Bend it Like Beckham*, *Guess Who*, *Smoke Signals*, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, *City of Joy*, *Dances with Wolves*, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, *Picture Bride*, *Hotel Rwanda*, *Daughters of the Sun*, *The Power of One*, *To Wong Foo Thanks for Everything*, *Gandhi*, *Osama*, *Smoke Signals*, *Whale Rider*, etc.

Assignment Four – Rhetorical Cultural Comparison and Ethnographic Interview. Using the information you've gained from the above two assignments and from the multicultural texts we have read in class, create a movie script based on your interview with your participant from another culture, or an idea you got from one of the movies you watched.

Action and Community Research

Assignment One - Preserving History: A Web Based Approach. Participants create informational CDs or websites on a local community. Participants take photos of buildings/areas of interest in their communities. Working with Local Historical Societies and Civic Organizations, students and teachers scan old photos of the same areas and write descriptions of the area. The end result is placed on a CD and/or website. Participants can then reflect on local people/places and develop a commitment and respect for their communities.

Assignment Two - Elementary School Fieldtrip. Find an elementary school teacher (on the list provided by the teacher) and contact him or her to set up a visit to his/her classroom to view how literacy is being taught and learned. Based on your experience visiting the classroom, answer the questions: (1) How similar or different was this classroom from what you remember of elementary school? (2) What did you learn about teaching from this experience? (3) What did you learn about literacy from this experience? (4) What did you learn about research from this experience?

Assignment Three – Then and Now Assignment. Students work together with an elderly member of the community to create a “then and now” montage/mosaic/medley of life in the community.

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