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Fieldschool Is Not What It Used to Be: Innovations in Teaching and Learning Ethnographic Methods

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Abstract

This article examines how teaching and learning ethnographic methods could be adapted to contemporary times, considering shifting understandings of ethnography and practical attention to the experiences of new fieldworkers. Using the European Field Studies Program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst as a case study, we identify several pedagogical techniques, including a cohort-based learning model, peer mentoring, and group blogging, to support students in navigating the practicalities and challenges of fieldwork. We argue that these techniques cultivate a collaborative learning environment and enhance first-time fieldwork experience despite the physical distances fieldwork typically implies.

Keywords: *teaching; ethnographic methods; fieldwork; fieldschool*

Introduction

Anthropologists have long reflected on the ethical and practical dilemmas of their signature method: ethnography. What are the essential or defining features of the elusive ethnographic method? How are these changing as the ethical sensibilities and expectations of the discipline shift and as travel and information technologies evolve? In their provocative volume, *Fieldwork Is Not What It Used to Be*, Faubion and Marcus (2009) persuasively argued that the “Malinowskian mise-en-scene” of the lone ethnographer immersed in a stable, long-term, and clearly demarcated “fieldsite” has long ceased to bear much resemblance to fieldwork today. Anthropologists today sometimes “commute” to fieldwork, Skype or Zoom with informants, recruit participants through social media, and often find it difficult to pinpoint when fieldwork begins and ends. As Lassiter and Campbell suggest, “[t]he field’ as we know it—and ethnography for that matter—has changed faster than its pedagogies” (2010, 760). The obstacles placed on travel and human subject

research by the global pandemic intensified questions about the future of ethnographic research as it has been traditionally understood (Günel and Watanabe 2024). While recent research shows that there is a growing need for greater methodological training in the discipline, especially for methods that challenge canonical practices, even the critical components of ethnographic practice (such as reflexivity, positionality, and taking field notes) are rarely taught in graduate training (Negrón et al. 2024; Ruth et al. 2022). As our questions, objects of analysis, methods, and real-world conditions mutate, and as ethnography is taken up by more scholars in related fields, we need to continue to engage in more intentional discussion and analysis of how the teaching of ethnographic research—and fieldwork more generally—is imagined and structured.

This essay seeks to contribute to this broader goal, taking as our case study the reconfiguration that took place in 2010 of the European Field Studies Program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Initially created in 1969 when fieldschools were abundant in anthropology, this one was unique for the focus on Europe¹ and for permitting beginning graduate students an early career (pre-dissertation) semester-long immersive fieldwork experience on a project of their choosing. The reconfiguration of this European Field Studies Program described below presents an early example of a broader trend in the discipline to rethink and redesign how graduate training could be accomplished in the field (Rabinow et al. 2008). This redesign picked up on a growing interest in more collaborative and “design studio” approaches to ethnographic research (L. E. Lassiter and Campbell 2010). At the same time, it was also distinctive from what has been described as the “refunctioning of ethnography” (Holmes and Marcus 2005a, 2005b, 2008; Marcus 2007), in that the redesign of the European Field Studies Program integrated epistemic collaboration not only in the research design process but also in the process of students conducting, analyzing, and writing up their ethnographic research.

In this essay, two former directors of the program (Urla and Harper) and a former participant in the fieldschool (Saluk) describe the conceptualization of the European Field Studies Program and how it changed over time to address transformations in the discipline and fieldwork contexts. Our discussion is based on an analysis of a collection of 442 entries by 4 faculty supervisors and 32 student fieldworkers on the program’s online content management system over the seven years of the program between 2011 and 2017. Drawing on an analysis of these entries, we identify several pedagogical techniques, including a cohort-based learning model, peer mentoring, and group blogging, that cultivate a collaborative learning environment and enhance first-time fieldwork experience despite the physical distance and separation in time and space that fieldwork typically implies. The entries on the content management system were coded using the open coding method. We first discussed the entries among ourselves as team members and then developed more thematic codes based on the data and our discussions. The

¹ The late 1960s and early 1970s were critical moments in the history of anthropology as the discipline moved its focus away from non-Western “others” toward Europe and its “people without history” (Wolf 1982), including peasants, workers, women, youth, ethnographically minoritized groups, and immigrants.

Institutional Review Board at the University of Massachusetts Amherst approved the analysis of the program's online content management system, and faculty and students who are directly quoted have provided consent.

The European Field Studies Program—Learning by Doing

Fieldschools are the laboratories of anthropologists—they offer students the opportunity to put their classroom learning to the test by working alongside other students and faculty. Simply put, fieldschools operate on the premise that there is no better way to learn the craft of fieldwork than by doing it (Gmelch and Gmelch 1999; Hawkins 2014; Iris 2009; McGoodwin 1978; Rasch et al. 2020). While fieldschools remain popular in archaeology, where graduate and undergraduate students accompany researchers to a particular excavation site, sometimes for multiple seasons, this teaching technique has become less common in the other subfields. The European Field Studies Program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst stands out as a unique style of fieldschool both for its longevity and format. Unlike most fieldschools where participants all go to the same site, our fieldschool was designed to let students pick their own project and fieldsite anywhere in Europe, broadly defined. Secondly, participation was open to graduate students from any subdiscipline—cultural, archaeological, biological, and linguistic anthropology. Over time, it was also opened to applicants from other disciplines (sociology, communication, political science, organizational studies, and even comparative literature). The framework was a flexible structure favoring a significant degree of independence and research projects that spanned a remarkably diverse array of topics, from the analysis of unique museum collections and archaeological landscapes in the U.K. to the study of squatter and anti-fracking movements in Spain, mobilizations for constitutional and economic reform in Iceland, immigrant sex workers in Istanbul, or radio journalism in Croatia, to name just a few of the topics undertaken.²

From its foundation in 1969, the European Field Studies Program was ambitious and committed to a great deal of autonomy for students. Students applied with a project in mind and a commitment to spend three consecutive semesters together. Occasionally, a fieldschool might have a thematic focus, but this was rare. Most of the time, topics could vary widely. The faculty member supervising the fieldschool in any particular year was a trained anthropologist who would also be pursuing a research topic in the study of European societies and cultures. However, it could not be expected that they would have the necessary specialization in all the topics of the students. Students were most often in their second or third year of graduate school. They were expected to have already gained or be undertaking additional readings under the guidance of their individual advisors

² The European Field Studies Program's founders were Joel M. Halpern and Oriol Pi-Sunyer. For the special collection of the program, including financial documents, correspondence between faculty and students about fieldwork, and student research proposals and final reports, see European Field Studies Program Records (RG 25 A6 E97). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries. http://findingaids.library.umass.edu/ead/murg025_a6_e97.

throughout the process. For the first three decades of its existence, the fieldschool unfolded in the following format. Students spent the Fall semester taking a course in research design: developing research questions, a methodology, and timelines; obtaining IRB review if needed; and gaining knowledge about the fundamentals of grant writing and ethical conduct.

Project proposals were workshoped multiple times, receiving commentary from the faculty supervisor of the group and fellow students. Advisors were silent partners throughout the process, and the research proposal the students prepared in their first semester was always circulated to them for approval. A panel of faculty affiliated with the fieldschool—typically, but not always, specialists in European anthropology—would review the finalized proposal and provide additional feedback. If approved, students would go to their respective fields in the following Spring semester. Students received a modest stipend to cover costs and six credits for their fieldwork. They also often used their proposals to seek supplemental external funding from Sigma Xi or other organizations. Typically, fieldwork was intended to last for the duration of the semester, and some students, when possible, would extend their stay into the summer.

Faculty supervisors rotated and were typically also conducting their own research in Europe and/or arranged a visiting position at a European university. Students and the faculty supervisor corresponded by letter or email as needed, with supervisors typically requiring progress reports at various points in the semester. When funds permitted, the supervisor visited the students in their fieldsites or organized a retreat of 3-4 days at a convenient location. Students found these breaks from fieldwork helped them to gain perspective, get useful feedback, and return to their projects more energized and focused. The last step of the program was a follow-up course the cohort took together in the subsequent Fall semester to inventory and analyze their data, culminating in a final research report and/or publishable paper. The experience concluded with a conference-type presentation to the department. The fieldschool provided an excellent means of conducting pilot research for a dissertation or a master's thesis. With this experience under their belt, students were often in an excellent position to successfully secure future external funding for a dissertation.

Innovations to the European Field Studies Program

The design of the program relied on a great deal of autonomy, self-direction, and individual resilience to be sure. Students had to make contacts, find housing, and troubleshoot problems that arose in the field largely on their own. As costs of living in many European locations increased, stipends were stretched thin, and it became difficult for the department in a public university to sustain a semester-long program purely on internal funds. In 2010, directors Harper and Urla were successful in obtaining funding from the National Science Foundation under the title "Cultural Heritage in European Societies

and Spaces” (CHESS)³; the grant prompted some critical changes in the fieldschool pedagogy we discuss in this essay.

The CHESS Program was structured around specific research streams⁴ each year, but each student had the flexibility to pick their own region and topic within the general stream. This flexibility was one of the real strengths and appeal of the program for graduate students. Most graduate students typically start their studies with a strong idea of what and where they want to research and have already invested time into learning the language(s) they will need. The structure of this fieldschool allowed students to explore their ideas for fieldwork and come back with clearer questions and a robust set of contacts that would ensure their future success. Students had affirmed having the basic language skills they needed for their project already in place to participate in the program. However, they also often took advantage of opportunities to improve those skills. The other key strength was the cohort structure of the training program and its progressive sequence, such that students moved through the process of proposal writing, fieldwork, and analysis together. The bonding that it produced for students to go through a “first fieldwork” experience simultaneously was repeatedly stressed by participants as one of the most valued aspects of the program. PIs Harper and Urla were resolved to find ways to retain these features of the program but also find ways to enhance them. One of the key innovations towards this end was creating a private, password-protected content management system for the fieldwork semester that students from all cohorts would use as an internal group blog to post their reflections and interact with and respond to each other. However, before we turn to the content management system, we also want to mention the way we sought to deprovincialize the anglophone North American bias of anthropological training and build in a more structured way to interact with European colleagues and students.

Connecting to European Anthropologists

Building relationships with local scholars and being in conversation with them was an integral part of the European Field Studies Program from the beginning. Students benefit from knowing about other traditions of anthropological research and recognizing how challenging (and potentially exciting) it can be to dialogue across those traditions. We wanted students to view European counterparts not simply as resources for their own work; we wanted them to reflect, as Heller and McElhinny (2017) have done, on how research questions are connected to broader historical and socio-political frameworks. This is also

³ National Science Foundation Grant IIA-1261172. “Cultural Heritage in European Societies and Spaces” [CHESS] (2013-2016). National Science Foundation IRES Program, OISE-0968575 (2010-2013), “Cultural Heritage in European Societies and Spaces” [CHESS]. For more information about the CHESS Program, see <https://www.umass.edu/chess/content/overview>.

⁴ For more information about the research streams, see <https://www.umass.edu/chess/content/research-focus>.

an essential way of decolonizing the Anglo-American bias in anthropology (Bishara 2023; Bolles 2023; Gupta and Stoolman 2022; Harrison 1992).

Given the diverse topics and countries students were working in, it was not always possible for fieldschool supervisors to provide students with local contacts. They had to find contacts themselves. But as a step in that direction, we sought to introduce more intentional engagement with fellow European anthropologists. We had done this informally in the past, thanks to the generous support of Giovanni Kezich, Director of the *Museo degli Usi e Costume della Gente Trentina*, located in San Michele all'Adige near Trento, Italy. We also partnered several times with faculty and graduate students in the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology at the Central European University in Budapest, Hungary. These contacts were cultivated through faculty members' collegial relationships. Thanks to our NSF grant, we were able to build into the structure of the program a longer and more robust partnership with the Department of Anthropology at the University of Barcelona, Spain, as well as the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales* in Marseille, France. This allowed us to invite scholars from those universities to come to the U.S. to do intensive seminars, as well as have our students gather in seminars with students from those programs. We also facilitated student participation in panel presentations with their peers from European universities at the European Association for Social Anthropologists and the American Anthropological Association conferences. Perhaps the most crucial benefit of these engagements was to expand our students' exposure to the different ways of studying anthropology and to the canons that are considered essential in diverse countries. Students from different sides of the Atlantic had the opportunity to present their work to each other at joint symposia we organized, to hear what kinds of projects they were each doing, and to be challenged by engaging with the intellectual priorities and questions of their peers in the countries where they conduct research. Formalizing the encounter with anthropologies and anthropologists on both sides of the Atlantic early in the careers of graduate students was an important goal and an enriching new dimension of the revision of this fieldschool structure.

Creating a Content Management System: The CHESS Blog

In this section, we turn to our main focus in this essay: the pedagogical techniques we implemented to support students in navigating the practicalities and challenges of fieldwork, including a cohort-based learning model, peer mentoring, and group blogging. At the time, the best technology to implement these pedagogical techniques was to design a private, password-protected content management system limited to the mentors and participants. We created the system through the open-source platform Drupal and named it the "CHESS Blog" to use as an internal group blog to enhance communication among faculty supervisors and student fieldworkers. All cohorts were able to access the CHESS Blog and see each other's posts. Four faculty supervisors and 32 student fieldworkers contributed to the Blog between 2010 and 2017.

One of the most fruitful aspects of the European Fieldschool structure was the close engagement it fostered within the yearly cohort and across the cohorts of different years. This, in and of itself, was a way of learning anthropology since students engaged closely with the projects of their peers, which were often very different in nature. In the year Saluk participated, students studied topics ranging from childhood mortality through forensic specimens in Portugal, African slave-trade heritage in St. Helena, contemporary nationalist politics in Iceland, and international policy organizations in Kazakhstan to maternal health clinics in Turkey. Over the course of a semester, students typically became close allies, supporting and learning from each other as they went through the process of designing a project. Under the new structure of the NSF-sponsored program, the fieldwork semester began with a two-day symposium at the Department of Anthropology of the Universidad Autonoma in Barcelona, where our students and theirs had the opportunity to present their projects to each other and exchange feedback before departing for fieldwork.

The flexibility and independence to choose distinct fieldsites were attractive to graduate students—and they certainly got a close-up exposure to a wide range of anthropological projects. However, it also presented difficulties. Students can feel adrift when conducting fieldwork alone. Staying in touch was not always easy, and even hosting a mid-fieldwork retreat—as we often tried to do in the past—was not enough. As other researchers have documented, first-time fieldwork can be a time of intense vulnerability for students as they often find themselves “alone and in an unfamiliar context, . . . [facing] challenges that their pre-fieldwork training has done little to prepare them for” (Pollard 2009, 1). With internet access steadily improving, we approached the problem of providing more guidance to first-time fieldworkers by designing the CHESS Blog through which the supervisor and the students could stay in more regular contact. The Blog was structured to mirror a semester-long class. Each week, the supervisor posted a prompt or assignment for the students to do. Assignments followed a sequence of topics, from writing about first impressions and sensory descriptions of the physical environment—things one can do before one knows very many people—to sharing some of their challenges in taking fieldnotes, conducting interviews, experimenting with transect walks, Photovoice, gaining access to archives, or the ever-challenging encounter with fellow anthropologists and scholars in the field. Assignments gave students flexibility to discuss the challenges relevant to their specific methodology. While fieldwork supervisors sometimes adapted or improvised the weekly prompts according to their group, it was customary to always have students reflect mid-way through their fieldwork on how their original questions had changed since they arrived and to describe at least one ethical quandary they faced.

We found the CHESS Blog to be a technology of communication well suited to the evolving and dynamic nature of fieldwork. It was a means of encouraging and sharing the recursive reflection on experience that is at the heart of ethnography. It was also private to faculty supervisors and members of the cohort, thereby allowing for a freer exchange of ideas. In all assignments, students were encouraged to respond to each other, not just to the supervisor. As time went on, we created a one-credit Lab as a fourth-semester course

in which students who had already completed the Field Studies Program returned as more advanced mentors, reading and responding to Blog posts, sharing their own experiences, and providing tips or support to the students in the field.

The CHESS Blog structure allowed for much flexibility in addressing topics as they arose. At the start of the Blog, topics selected by the supervisor tended to be fairly traditional methodological issues (interviewing, taking fieldnotes, and so forth). With time, we, as supervisors, became less driven by formal methodological questions and more open to allowing students to choose what they wanted to write about. As we know, fieldwork can be an emotional rollercoaster, triggering anxiety, excitement, triumph, embarrassment, loneliness, awkwardness, inadequacy, and much more. Harper and Urla considered these as the “sidebar” stories anthropologists told over dinner or beer. However, we found that our students wanted to discuss them more openly on the Blog. One participant remarked, “No one told me fieldwork was so emotional!” Thus, at the urging of the students, the syllabus of Blog topics was expanded, and students were invited to discuss their feelings and experiences in addition to methodological issues: sharing and reflecting on what was challenging, upsetting, or fun about their fieldwork.

This level of regular and multidimensional exchange during the fieldwork period paid off in the follow-up semester in the Fall when students returned. The follow-up class would typically begin with an assignment to conduct an inventory of the varied kinds of material the students produced or obtained. Prior to the Blog, students’ follow-up class was more like a loosely assembled set of independent studies. After the Blog, we could observe that students knew much more about how one another’s projects had evolved and were generally more engaged with one another’s research findings and, thus, better peer mentors.

The CHESS Blog Assignments

Ethnographic fieldwork is an immersive and improvisational endeavor, and it is therefore personally and emotionally challenging because fieldworkers are usually cut off from their social life and everyday support structures. They find themselves in new places trying to adapt to their environments, develop and maintain relationships, and cultivate researcher personalities. This situation also applies to fieldworkers doing research “at home” who find themselves in familiar environments but with new roles and responsibilities (Altorki and El-Solh 1988; Narayan 1993). As a result, fieldwork reveals and exacerbates vulnerabilities, especially for first-time fieldworkers, who are simultaneously learning about doing fieldwork and learning about their research topic. In this section, we dig deeper into what the CHESS Blog posts reveal about the fieldwork experience of students.

Ethnography, as Ortner (2006, 42) suggests, is “the attempt to understand another life world using the self—as much of it as possible—as the instrument of knowing.” “Situating” one’s self in ethnographic research means being attentive to the ways in which one’s structural conditions impact fieldwork relations but also using embodiment and affect as a

mode of analysis (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007), making the researcher even more vulnerable in the field. If vulnerability and insecurity are endemic features of the fieldwork experience, it may be even more so for fieldworkers who identify as women, sex/gender nonconforming, or from minoritized backgrounds (Berry et al. 2017; Bradford and Crema 2022; Hanson and Richards 2019; Henson 2020; Kloß 2017; Krishnan 2015). Thus, some intentional reflection on one's sense of self and positionality seemed an excellent way to begin fieldwork. The initial assignments included questions encouraging participants to document and reflect on how they perceived themselves, how they thought participants perceived them, and related difficulties and adjustments. Responses often revealed vulnerabilities intrinsic to fieldwork in general but also unique to each participant's positionalities and personal circumstances. Apart from common logistical challenges, the fieldschool participants recounted instances of sexual harassment, unwelcoming encounters, and microaggressions in their respective fieldsites. Engaging in long-term, uninterrupted, "traditional" fieldwork became difficult for others due to family and caregiving responsibilities or visa and immigration restrictions. As a result, some of the participants had to conduct their fieldwork in the form of short-term, consecutive field trips, similar to what has recently been conceptualized as "patchwork ethnography" (Günel and Watanabe 2024).

The close and continuous contact provided by the CHESS Blog was especially valuable when fieldworkers encountered these challenges. It encouraged students to share their struggles, learn from and empathize with each other, and receive support from faculty supervisors and peer mentors. Faculty and peers' ability to engage in mutual conversations on a regular basis helped students turn their challenges into ethnographic moments. These conversations enabled fieldworkers to reflect on their experiences and mold them into analytical insights.

Each week, students responded to supervisors' specific questions related to fieldwork, shared their struggles and triumphs, and commented on fellow students' posts. There was also a small group of peer mentors each year from previous cohorts whose role was to respond to students' posts and encourage them to deepen their observations and analyses. Participants frequently mentioned that reading each other's posts on the Blog and getting ideas was also helpful, in addition to the tips provided by faculty supervisors and peer mentors. Below, we will discuss a few Blog assignments and common issues across cohorts and within years.

First Impressions and Making Research Contacts

One of the first Blog assignments was to describe the process of locating oneself in a "fieldsite," making contacts, and making first impressions of the field. The goal of the assignment was to help students familiarize themselves with their respective fieldsites and open a space for sharing their initial challenges.

Given that this was the first assignment right after students embarked on their field journeys, it was not surprising that many discussions that took place on the Blog touched on the difficulty of reaching out to people, especially when feeling shy and awkward to do so, feeling like an intruder bothering people, or feeling insecure about one's linguistic abilities. Accustomed to email as an everyday form of professional communication, new fieldworkers expressed frustration when their emails went unanswered or things moved at a slower speed than they were used to or expected. They mentioned feeling overwhelmed while navigating changing roles, such as from a guest to a researcher or from a "native" to a researcher in their respective fieldsites.

Sharing these vulnerabilities, seeing they were not alone in feeling anxious in early-stage fieldwork and receiving faculty and peer mentors' encouragement and tips were helpful in avoiding self-recrimination and productively navigating those moments. As one peer mentor advised, "It can help to consciously adopt a 'fieldwork persona' that is an exaggerated version of [oneself]" to get over shyness, but "it is also okay to just be yourself, even if you are an introvert." Another helpful tip from peer mentors was to use linguistic insecurities to one's advantage by asking a lot of questions to research participants about the language, news stories, and what is going on in the field. A faculty supervisor's advice about reframing "bothering people" was also helpful:

Instead, think of your participant observation practice as "drawing people out" by being friendly and listening with genuine interest Shy people may appreciate this because you ask them questions and are not being cliquish like the "in crowd" at an event. Extroverts may like to have new people to perform for. So your presence is potentially an enhancement for others, not a bother.

Another common challenge for first-time fieldworkers was feeling out-of-sorts in a new place, as one fieldworker mentioned: "So... locating myself in a 'site' has seemed a really, really disjointed process, and I am afraid that 'disjointed' may come to characterize my fieldwork as a whole." The faculty and peer mentors' tips in this situation revolved around the importance of establishing a daily routine and having some type of regular schedule as a way of finding structure and coping with feeling out of place or disoriented in the first weeks of fieldwork. Students developed strategies such as finding a busy cafe to go to every day to read newspapers and watch people or signing up for a language class to regularize their schedule and meet new people.

Data Gathering and Recording

Another early Blog assignment was to reflect on one's process of taking fieldnotes and recording data. The goal of the assignment was to help students hone their ethnographic skills and habits of keeping fieldnotes and documenting their research process. For any novice fieldworker, developing the art of keeping detailed, organized, and systematic records of research activities with an eye to their future use is undoubtedly one of the great challenges.

This challenge became apparent in the Blog posts. Having gone through similar challenges recently, peer mentors provided constructive tips for fieldworkers-in-training. The Blog archive shows that mentors encouraged fieldworkers to find a quiet time during the day to reflect and write and to establish a routine for taking fieldnotes, especially during the first weeks of fieldwork before things got busy or messy. They also suggested jotting down notes rather than taking full notes in busy settings and turning those jottings into fieldnotes later. Students had, of course, read many tips about fieldnote taking in their preparatory class from works such as Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw's *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (2011). Peer mentors reminded them of techniques they had read about and could now use to face the daunting prospect of turning experience into data. And indeed, writing Blog posts was also part of the fieldnote-taking process, as student fieldworkers were asked to report and reflect on their most recent activities each week. The intimate, unfinished, yet rich nature of Blog posts helped students cultivate a habit of producing "small fieldnotes" (Bedi et al. 2021) enriched by sharing and thinking collectively.

Another common challenge students reported was to take fieldnotes during daily conversations without making the interlocutor(s) uncomfortable or disrupting the natural flow of the conversation. Peer mentors assured students that it would get easier over time, and the contacts with whom the researcher spends time regularly would get used to them taking notes. They also provided specific tips, such as asking the other person right away if they were okay with the researcher jotting down some notes rather than having the person wonder why (and what) they were writing the whole time. Another tip—a kind of update to Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw's (2011) fieldnote advice—was to jot down key words or pieces of a conversation on their phone first and then write them up later to make it seem more natural as if they were texting. As always, however, students were advised to follow their instincts and be aware that some fieldsite situations might make note-taking problematic. This might be for a variety of reasons, such as the political climate or cultural context. And thus, regular writing at other times of the day was even more vital.

During the Blog conversations, one faculty supervisor stressed the importance of developing a system for differentiating different types of data (e.g., fieldnotes, interviews, and written and visual materials such as handouts, photographs, brochures, pamphlets, or e-documents) and keeping track of all the data from the beginning in an inventory with names, dates, content, and some preliminary notes. Another faculty supervisor provided a particularly helpful tip:

Keep thinking about what you might be able to do with them later—what research questions could they help you answer? This is an example of fieldwork's constant pendulum swing between deductive and inductive thinking—the questions we bring with us to the field, and the questions the field brings to us.

Research Relationships and Ethics

Another Blog assignment was to discuss issues related to the process of establishing research relationships and ethical dilemmas that would arise. The goal was to encourage students to reflect on relationships and ethics and help them hone their problem-solving skills.

One of the striking themes emerging from the Blog conversations was navigating the ethical challenges of working with “repugnant others” (Harding 1991), whose views or behavior the researcher finds reprehensible. As a student mentioned, “[t]rying to understand other people’s points-of-view (and especially politics) can be exciting when they coincide with ours, but when they don’t . . . you’re face-to-face with the cringe-y side of anthropology and suspending your initial judgments in order to learn is definitely not easy.”

One student conducting research with urban migrants was unsure how to engage with a neighborhood association that had many residents firmly opposed to the migrants. The association had been open to talking to the fieldworker. The student was uncertain about engaging with the association and concerned that it could impact their relationship with migrants. What ethical considerations should the ethnographer take into account when it comes to portraying anti-migrant views in their research? The peer mentors’ advice once again proved particularly helpful in this scenario as they were able to relate the student’s experience to their own and gave concrete examples of how they navigated similar situations in the previous years. One of the peer mentors, who studied elites, advised the student not to approach the people in the neighborhood association as a fixed category or as one-dimensional “bad guys.” Another peer mentor, who also had a similar experience with activist groups in another country, tried to encourage understanding of the association members’ perspective, adding:

I imagine many or at least some of the [association members] also see themselves as the “real” victims of the globalized movement of resources and opportunities (might be facing foreclosures, unemployment, cuts in public resources). In their position they see migrants making a living and receiving benefits, while the state is unwilling or unable to help them. Basically, they’re also in a tough and complex position!

Another peer mentor stressed the importance of representing people in a “faithful” way:

I think we have a responsibility to portray our interlocutors faithfully (not to say “truthfully”) as the three-dimensional beings they are. They certainly also have stories to be told . . . whether or not you want to hear and engage with those stories is up to you, but if you do decide to, I think it is important to come at those interactions with a willingness to hear that you may have to first cultivate in yourself.

As peer mentors stressed, approaching people who make us uncomfortable (or whose perspectives we might even despise) as full humans rather than as “bad guys” can be one of the more challenging aspects of fieldwork and one that benefits from mutual support. Trying to understand the social, political, and economic dynamics behind the words and actions of these individuals and portraying them as individuals with unique stories to be told is the most ethical way to build and continue research relationships. A deep engagement with these people in such a way reveals important insights about the research topic at hand. As a faculty supervisor mentioned, “with an old-fashioned ethnographic stance of curiosity and active listening,” we could turn “truly uncomfortable social situations into learning experiences.”

Participant Observation

Another Blog assignment asked students to discuss experiences with participant observation techniques. Similar to the challenges of describing a set “fieldsite,” students often had difficulty at the beginning in deciding where participant observation started and where it ended.

The assignment and Blog entries helped students realize that ethnographic insights come in many forms, including our mundane experiences. Encounters of the most day-to-day kind, such as trying to rent an apartment or get in contact with people, were part of participant observation and provided students with valuable insights. Peer and faculty conversations encouraged students to turn everyday experiences that did not seem to be about fieldwork *per se* into insights into their fieldsite’s social fabric or norms. Reformulating everyday life as a spectrum of participant observation helped students gain critical analytical insights about their fieldsites.

For instance, one of the students had a conflict with their landlord at the beginning of their research. The conflict was prolonged, and due to the time it took to resolve the issue and the uncertainty of their housing arrangement, the student could not start their research on time. The faculty and peer mentors encouraged the student to turn the interactions with the landlord into ethnographic moments and to reflect on what they were learning about what money, financial insecurity, or home mean for people in their fieldsite.

There were also impromptu Blog assignments to help students with their participant observation. For instance, one faculty supervisor asked students to describe their physical and sensory environments. Students chose a key space or site that was important for their research and provided a detailed description that included as many sensorial dimensions as they could, from what the space or site looked like, colors, light, and so on, to smell, feel, temperature, and air quality. They were asked to describe those environments in a rich and textured way so someone else reading could literally imagine and feel being there with them. The physical/sensorial descriptions assignment was helpful for students to later reflect on how their environments conditioned them to see things in a certain way.

Navigating How Others Perceive Us

Another assignment was to discuss how students were negotiating their self-representation with the research participants they were working with or wanted to work with and what struggles they had in presenting themselves and/or their research projects. As part of the assignment, students were also asked to reflect on how they thought others perceived them or what might be influencing the way they interacted with other people in their fieldsites.

The goal of the assignment was to help students realize how ethnography is also self-work. While the fieldworkers' job seems to be only about observing others, it is equally about reflecting on themselves, their ways of being in the world, and their self-presentation. The assignment prompt and subsequent conversations often revealed the importance of recognizing this self-work in teaching and learning ethnographic methods: How does the fieldworker push their boundaries in different environments but also know when to step back? Students grappled with how to present themselves to various constituencies. They reflected on how others perceived them and how these perceptions affected the kind of fieldwork they were able to do (or not).

Students often discussed how different identities (e.g., age, gender, parental status) could be used strategically depending on the context and research relationship. Several students had small children at home—a fact that very much marked their fieldwork experience. At times, finding commonality in being a parent provided a way of bonding with a fellow researcher or gaining the good favor of a recalcitrant collections manager. The Blog discussions revealed creative strategies such as presenting oneself as a doctoral researcher rather than a student to be taken seriously or, conversely, presenting oneself as a student in situations where the fieldworker did not want to project themselves as an “expert” or presume a higher status than their interlocutors. Parenting students found that presenting oneself as a parent/mother was also a fruitful strategy, as being seen as a parent/mother and not just as a researcher helped them connect with people on a different level. As one student mentioned, “[a]ll my experience of having a kid tells me that they can be unparalleled ambassadors.”

Conclusion

Ethnography is a constantly changing, dynamic, and evolving endeavor. Methodologies have to be customized to the context. More than a set of standard techniques, what we cultivate are sensibilities, a capacity to listen deeply, actively, and to reflect. This makes fieldschools or guided fieldwork training programs all the more valuable for the way they provide opportunities for learning by doing. Professors who take on the exciting task of teaching ethnographic methods need to reflect on how their own fieldwork experiences may be radically different from those of their students. Information technology, the internet, and platforms such as WhatsApp offer new opportunities to stay in touch with supervisors and peers during fieldwork and to stay in touch with “the field”

in ways that were highly difficult and costly in the past. The Malinowskian image of the fieldworker stranded on an island for months waiting for the post is long gone. There is now an opportunity to virtually accompany students in the process, guide the cultivation of sensibilities, and try to support them through challenges in ways that were not possible before.

Teachers of ethnography, therefore, need to reflect on these changes and how teaching and learning ethnographic methods could be adapted accordingly. Facilitating contact both with European anthropologies and with and among student learners was one of the key goals of the redesigned European Field Studies Program. Our study of the Blog shows that this sustained and deepened engagement with fellow students and scholars was highly valued by the participants. Our pedagogical techniques, centering on a cohort-based learning model, enhanced with peer mentoring and group blogging, produced a valuable sharing and bonding experience for students who went through their first fieldwork experience simultaneously. This essay has attempted to share some of the ways that these techniques allowed us to leave behind some of the “lone ethnographer” (Rosaldo 1989) models of fieldwork and cultivate a new kind of shared learning experience despite the physical distance and isolation that ethnographic research typically implies.

The old assumption of “fieldwork as an individualistic [and masculinist] rite of passage” (Berry et al. 2017, 537) ignores how ethnography is inevitably a collaborative endeavor (L. Lassiter 2005). As feminist and Indigenous scholars emphasize, knowledge production itself is relational; it is always produced in cooperation with others (Smith 2012; Weiss 2016; Wilson 2009). Stories from our fieldschool show that an intentionally peer-centered pedagogy benefits first-time fieldworkers by putting this relational aspect at the center of teaching and learning ethnography. Through personal experiences posted on the CHES Blog, students are able to see that challenges that initially seemed individual and isolated problems actually reflect common issues faced by all ethnographers. Going through the first fieldwork experience with the support of a cohort allowed students to openly share their vulnerabilities in the field, which they later used as a basis for further reflection and analysis. As one participant mentioned, sharing the unedited version of one’s first fieldwork “[e]specially in an academic context where so much of the emphasis is on cultivating professional, public selves . . . can be . . . super nerve-wracking.” Yet, it also opens ethnographic knowledge production to be more collaborative, insightful, and profoundly empowering.

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Appendix A. The CHESB Blog Assignments

Week 1 – First Impressions and Making Research Contacts

Post an entry on the Blog that includes your early impressions of your fieldsite, the process of making contacts and locating yourself in a “site,” and a discussion of any adjustments you have had to make to your planned research project now that you are in the field.

For “native” anthropologists, try to reflect on your return to your hometown. What has changed? What do you see differently now?

For those of you who have not left yet, write a paragraph or two letting us know how your preparations are going.

Week 2 – Data Gathering and Recording

Post your reflections on the process of taking fieldnotes and recording data. What kinds of data have you collected so far? What systems have you worked out for taking notes? When and how do you write them and what difficulties or questions do you have about writing fieldnotes?

Week 3 – Research Relationships and Ethics

Post an entry on the Blog in which you discuss issues related to the process of establishing research relationships and any ethical dilemmas that have come up in your research so far. If you went through an IRB review, discuss how you have attempted to reconcile the formal, institutional ethics of that process with the more fluid social interactions of qualitative research on the ground.

Week 4 – Participant Observation

Post an entry on the Blog in which you discuss your experiences with participant observation and questions about PO techniques that have arisen so far. If you are doing lab/archaeological research, please write about a research method you have been using and questions that are arising as you collect more data. Is data collection proceeding as planned? What adjustments to your method have you made during fieldwork?

Week 5 – Interviewing

Post an entry on the Blog in which you discuss your experiences with interviewing and questions about interviewing techniques that have arisen so far. If you are doing lab/archaeological research, please write about a research method you have been using and questions that are arising as you collect more data. Is data collection proceeding as planned? What adjustments to your method have you made during fieldwork?

Week 6 – Sensory Descriptions

So far, we've had lots of talk about the ups and downs and challenges of interviewing as a data gathering technique. For a change of pace, . . . let's focus this week's posts on description of your physical/sensorial environments. Take a key space or site that is important for your research and do a rich description that includes as many sensorial dimensions as you can. From what it looks like, colors, light and so on, to smell, feel, temperature, air quality. Anything and everything. Try to describe in a rich and textured way so someone else reading can literally imagine and feel being there with you. How do the spaces of your fieldwork condition you? Maybe condition what is happening?

Week 7 – Material Deliberation

Pick an item or collection of items representing the material culture of your field site or project (and please post photos as visual aids if possible). Discuss the cultural and social significance of these artifacts. If you need a little inspiration, see Kerim Friedman on [bubble tea in Taiwan](#) or the [Material World blog](#) out of University College London. Or check out photographer [Peter Menzel's work](#) (Material Worlds and Hungry Planet).

Week 8 – Discoveries and How Others Perceive Us

Post an entry on the Blog in which you discuss any of the following issues: 1. Something you discovered or did that was important for your research that you did NOT anticipate; 2. Your identity or status as you think it to be perceived by your collaborators/informants. How do you think they see you? What makes you think that? And how do you think it affects the kind of fieldwork you are able to do (or not do)?

Impression management

Please write about how you are negotiating your self representation to research subjects you are working with or want to work with. What struggles do you have in presenting your research project? Yourself? Do you have a sense of how others perceive you or what might be influencing the way they interact with you?

Week 9 – Revisiting Research Questions

Post an entry on the Blog in which you discuss your progress toward your initial research questions and how your questions have transformed as a result of your fieldwork experiences. Have your questions remained the same? Have you had the urge to change them? Do you sense this is a well-founded impulse as the result of your fieldwork experiences?

Week 10 – Lessons Learned and Wrapping Up

Post an entry on the Blog in which you assess the state of your research project. What have you done and learned so far? What fieldwork methods have been most helpful? What needs to be done before you leave your fieldsite?

Week 11 – Letters to the Next Cohort

Write a letter to the next CHES cohort with your thoughts and advice. What do you wish you had known last fall semester? What did you do to prepare that served you well? What advice do you have for them in terms of proposal writing? Fieldwork logistics? Seeking research contacts? Then, when it comes to spring semester fieldwork, what advice do you have for them? This can include fieldwork tips, but also things like self-care, making friends in the field, and ways to think about your research while you are doing it. If you have already left the field, any thoughts about wrapping up work and saying goodbye?