

Beyond the Frame: Becoming Teachers and Students of Meaning

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ACTIVITY FROM ACTFL LANGUAGE EDUCATOR

1. Students receive a web link for the Munich Oktoberfest that embeds several live webcams and a worksheet for finding information about products and practices: what the hours are, how many tents there are, and what kinds of souvenirs are available.
2. Students watch one of the webcams and describe what they see.
3. Students then write an essay, addressing the following points:
 - **Describe** what you saw on the webcam.
 - **Compare** what you saw **with what you expected to see**.
 - **Explain** what you realized about the Oktoberfest event and the role it plays in Munich, Germany, and the world.

Page and Benander, "Helping Students Change Their View of the World: Moving from products and practices to perspectives." *The Language Educator*, Vol. 9, January 2014, p. 31

PRINCIPLES OF AHYPOTHETICAL RESEARCH FROM ETHNOGRAPHY

Ethnography is...

"research designed to explore cultural phenomena. [...] It observes the world [...] from the point of view of the subject (not the ethnographer) and records all observed behavior and describes all symbol-meaning relations using concepts that avoid casual explanations."

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnography>

"The challenge for the researcher is to avoid conscious interference as much as possible, and consistently to be wary of imputing motive and/or internal state to another, solely on the basis of perceived behavior. The researcher must be constantly concerned with context, conscientiously detailing the circumstances being studied. [...] A priority of the **ahypothetical** research technique is reportorial description (in narrative style) and qualitative analysis or interpretation.

Denzin, *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century*,
<http://www.amazon.com/Interpretive-Ethnography-Ethnographic-Practices-Century/dp/0803972997>

NOTES FROM A LECTURE, "DEVELOPING THE EYE OF AN ETHNOGRAPHER,"
BY JOHANNA SCHOSS, CORNELL UNIVERSITY, 2007

The essence of the ethnographic approach is the idea of **radical empiricism**: engaging with the particular as your interlocutors explain it, which allows you to be *surprised* by findings you could not have anticipated. The goal is understanding how key words and concepts are defined by cultural participants and then comparing this to your own categories and perspectives.

To carry out interpretative research, the ethnographer strives to adopt a stance of **intentional innocence**, which involves suspending your own interpretations, meanings and assessments.

Begin by identifying your framing notions about the cultural event.

Prepare to carry out a **depth interview** to document cultural participants' native categories/local meanings, assessments and interpretations.

Compare your data to arrive at a 3rd dimension of understanding, interpretations that come to light from the interplay between insider/outsider perspectives.

Strategies for carrying out depth interviews

- Recognize and elicit the definitions for *native categories*
- Get participants to elaborate on the categorical/organizational schemes they are using
- Prompt participants to talk about how they define and use key concepts
- Ask for an explanation for everything -- even things you think you already understand:
 - Definitions....What is this thing? What does it do?
 - Other terms used to describe this thing
 - Important relational categories (what types of this thing exist)
 - What does this thing consist of? What are its components and features?

Encourage the participants to tell you stories, to narrate specific experiences and events for you. Use probes like: "Tell me about the last time you ate that special food. Where were you, who was there....? This encourages people to talk about their actual experiences and past actions and to focus on specifics, rather than just giving a hypothetical answer.

Use the environment to get your interlocutor to talk in more concrete terms. For example, if you are talking about a student's sense of personal space and if you are in the student's dorm room or can see it on Skype, ask that person to show you around their space while they talk about it.

If the interviewee gets stuck, say:

"It sounds to me like you're describing something in a way that's a little different from what I think of when I use that term. I just want to be sure that I understand what you mean by it."

- **Don't ask leading questions** (e.g. "Don't you think that...?" "Is it true that....?" "Wouldn't you agree that...?"), and **avoid hypothetical questions** or responses.
- Withhold all judgements (either positive or negative, agreement or disagreement).
- Focus your questions on people's practices, routine actions, and their interactions with objects and spaces, not on their attitudes.
- Be an engaged listener: listen closely to what people say and watch closely what they do because these two things are not always the same!

Probes can be more or less specific. You can use a probing questions to encourage a respondent to elaborate their answer in a specific direction. For example, you may want respondents to describe a particular process they used, or to offer an example of something they did, or to identify specifically which people they interacted with:

- Use follow-up questions in the form of "what...", "when...", "where..." and especially "how..." In describing how they did something, people also tend to provide an explanation of what it means to them.
- Avoid asking why a respondent did something specific. Even if you don't intend it, this kind of question may put respondents on the defensive, or be seen to imply a judgement of their behavior, or simply make the respondent feel under pressure.

Getting Respondents to Provide More Detailed Responses [being an **active listener**]

- Simply repeating back the last part of what someone has just told you is often an effective way to encourage them to elaborate on their thoughts and provide more detail. It also lets the participant know that you are listening to and getting what they're saying.
- With open-ended questions it's especially important to give the respondent feedback that indicates you are paying attention, interested and understanding what he/she is telling you. Without this feedback, respondents will tend to clam up and give short, simplified answers. You can provide this feedback by simple forms of back-channeling, such as "uh huh" "yes.." "I see." Don't interrupt the participant with these comments, of course, but use them to fill pauses in the participant's response.

REFRAMED ACTFL ACTIVITY

Task 1: Developing questions for a depth interview

1. Students work in small groups to note down their assumptions and expectations about the cultural event. (framing)
2. Groups watch a webcam and note observations. Afterwards they identify ***tension points*** in their observations: products/practices that were different from expectations and products/practices that *might* be different from their expectations.
3. Groups identify who/what types of people they would interview (raising questions about **possible differences of perspective** within the national culture: generational, socio-economic, gendered...).
4. Groups write a list of **questions** they would ask their cultural participants in order to get at **native categories/perspectives**.
5. Class compares and compiles a master list of questions.

Task 2 : Gathering data to arrive at perspectives

1. Groups carry out one of the following activities:
 - Interviewing cultural participants in the community or via Skype (using the depth interview questions from Task 1)
 - Reading an L2 news article or sociological study about the phenomenon
 - Reading an L2 passage from a literary text or watching a scene from a film that addresses the phenomenon
2. Groups note tentative responses to the master list of questions, providing evidence from their native sources for their responses.
3. Groups report findings and the class compiles a set of interpretations about cultural perspectives plus any further questions that might seem useful. (**reframing**)

For more ideas related to *becoming teachers and students of meaning*, here is a link to my textbook, ***Le Littéraire dans le quotidien*** (The Literary in the Everyday) offered as Open Educational Resource by COERLL (Center for Open Educational Resources for Language Learning), UT Austin. While these materials are for learners of French at the first-year level, the approach is applicable to any language. You can read the approach in the Teacher's Guide:

<https://drive.google.com/folderview?id=0Byg7PyauMJRScGxPdlpReVJQaUU&usp=sharing>