Using Culture to Cultivate Conversations:  
*Lessons Learned from Whiteboard Ethnographic Research*

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Project Goals

- Explore the ways in which ethnographic studies can inform libraries' understanding of student usage of space.
- Examine students' personal and academic habits, interests and preferences, with the aim of using their responses to better identify ways in which libraries can contribute to student success.
- Gain a greater understanding of methods through which students engage in dialogue and develop informal learning communities within library spaces.
Methods

**Approach**

Participatory on multiple levels

**Timeline and field sites**

*Spring 2015:* 3 whiteboards, 30 days, UT Knoxville

*Spring 2016:* 5 whiteboards, 8 days, UTK and University of Richmond

**Locations**

Gathering/transitional space
Collaborative study space
Quiet study space
Waiving Informed Consent

Receiving signed informed consent statements from each subject will not be possible. The PIs request a waiver of informed consent under the guidelines of 45 CFR 46.116(d)

- The research involves no more than minimal risk to the subjects.
- The waiver or alteration will not adversely affect the rights and welfare of the subjects.
- The research could not practicably be carried out without the waiver or alteration.
- Whenever appropriate, the subjects will be provided with additional pertinent information after participation.
A: My dream/ideal library has ______.

B: In three words or less, why did you choose your major?

C: If there were a song about your life, what would it be called? Or, what song defines you?

D: What is the most interesting thing you've learned this semester?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding and Transcription</th>
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<tr>
<th>Student Success</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Response to another response</th>
<th>Physical/Mental Health &amp; Wellbeing</th>
<th>Habits and Preferences</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Current or campus events</td>
<td>Advertisements or Promotions</td>
<td>Dialogue &amp; Community Opportunities</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jokey/Sarcastic/Whimsical</td>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Literal Answers</td>
<td>Library Spaces</td>
<td>Library Services/Resources</td>
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<td>Academics</td>
<td>Creative Answers</td>
<td>Non-Library Spaces</td>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Unknown Reference</td>
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Findings and Considerations

- Student-focused versus library-specific questions
- Board locations and placement
- Privacy and openness
- Range of responses and experiences
- Role of the library
- Value of student voices
“Ethnography is always local; it is about particular individuals in a specific context.”

Hobbs & Klare (2010, p. 356)
Course Corrections

- **Consider your work style and comfort zone**
  Does this project relate to or challenge your approach?

- **Expect the unexpected**
  Weather, external events, (re)moveable data

- **Budget more time than you think you'll need**
  Setup, transcription, and coding

- **Continue the conversation**
  And bring others into this conversation!
Lessons Learned

- Don't get too tied to the methods
  Our method helped us think beyond the instrument

- Think about your marginalized communities

- One assessment is not going to change everything
  Assessment is a puzzle/ecosystem

- Every assessment that you do is also the beginning of another project
Recommended Reading


Thank you!

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