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

Sojourna J. Cunningham, Social Sciences and Assessment Librarian
University of Richmond

Anna Sandelli, Student Success Librarian for User Experience and Instructional Assessment
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Southeastern Library Assessment Conference, 2017
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
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.
Categories and Questions

A: Student Success

B: Demographics

C: Habits & Preferences

D: Dialogue & Community Opportunities

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?
### Coding and Transcription

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Response to another response</th>
<th>Physical/Mental Health &amp; Wellbeing</th>
<th>Habits and Preferences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Success</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Response to another response</td>
<td>Physical/Mental Health &amp; Wellbeing</td>
<td>Habits and Preferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Current or campus events</td>
<td>Advertisements or Promotions</td>
<td>Dialogue &amp; Community Opportunities</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jokey/Sarcastic/Whimsical</td>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Literal Answers</td>
<td>Library Spaces</td>
<td>Library Services/Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academics</td>
<td>Creative Answers</td>
<td>Non-Library Spaces</td>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Unknown Reference</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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
Q&A

Recommended Reading


Thank you!

scunning@richmond.edu

asandell@utk.edu