



FIELDWORK IN THE CLASSROOM

Meeting other cultures, of course, is what anthropology is all about. But how can an instructor, faced with shrinking field trip budgets, arrange for eager students to meet other cultures, and have a first-hand anthropological field experience--without ever setting foot outside a classroom? To our surprise, at Marshall High School in Fairfax County, we found the answer only several doors down the corridor.

Like other schools in the Metro area, Marshall possesses a relatively large and diverse group of students from other cultures.* In Fairfax these students are enrolled in "English as a Second Language" (ESL) classes. Eager to meet American students, the recent newcomers to our country also want opportunities to practice their English. My fifteen budding anthropologists were just as eager to attempt an anthropological "field" experience. Mutual needs coalesced into the project described below.

For the anthropology students, the project grew out of a generalized discussion on the universals and variations in human social organizations. Prior class discussions centered around the anthropological process of gathering data on other cultures using observation and interview/ informant techniques.

Students settled on four questions to use in the interview activity: (1) What are the groups or institutions that are important in your life (family, school, church, club, etc.)? (2) What are the rules of behavior in each of these groups? (3) How did you learn these rules? and (4) Rank the groups in the order of importance to you. Using these questions, members of the class analyzed their own group memberships in American society and recorded their observations on a data-retrieval sheet.

The class then "traveled" to meet the other cultures--simply by taking a walk down the corridor. Each anthropology student was "chosen" by an ESL student through a numbered lottery. Such a procedure ensured that no one would be left out on either side and that one-on-one interviews could take place. During these interviews with their ESL partner, the anthropology students elicited information using their previously formulated questions. The interviews took two class periods, as the ESL students wanted to ask questions of the Americans as well--a delightful development. Both class sessions proceeded with little or no further prompting from either of the teachers involved.

"Debriefing" the anthropology class was the next step. During this process, discussion centered on two major topics. The process of gathering information on another culture was explored, with particular emphasis on the problems involved, including the language barrier and the reticence of some members of the study group. Students discussed appropriate formats for presenting their anthropological research, including not only their final interpretations but also their research methods, and the evidence on which they based their interpretations. Debriefing concluded, students wrote brief papers concerning the social groups of two cultures.

Over-all this type of interview activity could be used as an investigative tool for any facet of cultural anthropology. It stresses both the universals and the variables of the human condition in a non-

judgmental fashion. It can easily be extended in scope by expanding the number of interviews, or by having students analyze case studies of non-industrial societies written by anthropologists. Through this project, anthropology becomes not merely a body of knowledge to be studied, but an active process of discovery. Content, research, and writing skills are all brought into play in a coordinated fashion.

Was the project worth the effort? I think the answer must be a qualified yes. From the standpoint of achieving content objectives, obviously two hours of interviewing one or two members of another "modern" technically advanced society will not produce the analytical observations of a Margaret Mead or Colin Turnbull. But far more valuable than the content achieved was student involvement in the research process itself--the face-to-face encounter. And, perhaps best of all, the students enlarged their horizons and their circle of friends, an especially important side benefit for the ESL group, whose members sometimes feel isolated or submerged in a high school of sixteen hundred students.

*The cultures represented included Korean, Vietnamese, Iranian, Turkish, Greek, Colombian, and Chinese. Absentees, incidentally, interviewed older members of their own family, with equally interesting results.

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