AAD 630: Research Technique Assignment

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It is difficult to find a fluid starting point for a paper on how to do research. When there is no research question to broach, or no topic sentence to direct attention to, beginning can be jarring, awkward, and incongruent. It appears appropriate to clarify my emerging research interests, which include numerous concepts and nouns that I am trying to merge into an algorithm. I am curious about theoretical ideas of “authenticity” and “authority” and how they relate to museums as institutions. The museum world is stepping into a paradigm shift, triggering questions about the authority of stewardship, authentic interpretation, and an increase in public programming. In this paper I will identify two research methods that align with my research interests, find and review references for each method, and outline a hypothetical data collection and analysis strategy for one of the determined methods.

**Part 1**

The two research methods that are most applicable to my areas of interest are ethnographic and theoretical/analytical. Ziva O’Leary’s definition of ethnography is “the study of cultural groups in a bid to understand, describe and interpret a way of life from the point of view of its participants” (O’Leary, p. 133). While this describes ethnography in its more traditional vein, I would argue for a slightly broader definition of the research method via a narrower lens. Ethnography is, indeed, about the participants and—dare I say—informants in question. The phrase “a way of life” seems large enough to fill every corner of one’s box of potential research goals, but using such wording insinuates an all-encompassing approach to any one cultural group. Etymologically, ethnography is literally “writing culture/people/folk” (Ethnography). Culture comes in big and small. Within my own research
interests, I would like to look at the culture of the museum; I would like to look at the people who visit museums and why they do so, what they expect from their experience. It would be a horrendous assumption on my part if I were to fill in the blanks for participants about how they experience museums. I would need their viewpoint, their narratives. Without that qualitative information, anything I might conclude would be meaningless.

I could not make any statements at all, of course, if I did not have a theoretical foundation from which to build. The work of arts administrators, folklorists, anthropologists, museum professionals, and social thinkers before me is a crucial component to my potential research. I must know what was said and what was thought before I can contribute to it. Theory is part of a toolkit which helps the researcher understand and conceptually shape the world around them, in small doses or large ones. I can reach back and pluck out Antonio Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony, for example, to help me analyze the construct of authority in museum stewardship. I can inspect John Falk’s far more recent work on museum visitor identity. Theory is a necessary backdrop for shaping what researchers wish to address, and why.

**Part 2**

review 1-2 references for each; prepare 1-3 page lit review from there sources

Finding sources on ethnography conducted within the realm of museums, and not simply museums that are ethnographic, has been challenging. Of all the sources I have discovered, only two seem to fit the mold for ethnographic research methods: “Staging the Beatles: ephemerality, materiality and the production of authenticity in the museum” by Marion Leonard, and John Falk’s *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*. Resources
centered around theory and analysis were easier to pinpoint, and I found several helpful articles like “Interrupting the gaze: on reconsidering authority in the museum” by B. Trofanenko and “Power and Authenticity: Moving From the Classroom to the Museum” by Andrea Kenkmann.

**Review: Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience by John Falk**

Falk’s book is arguably a case study, mixed with theory, and culminating in a call to action. He does use ethnographic techniques, however, in approaching his topic. There are numerous interviews with museum visitors, and Falk’s analysis and construction of a visitor experience model are based on fieldwork. In *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*, Falk clarifies the foundation of his argument. He believes that museums are not neutral, that they use one of two lenses in their approach to institutional operation. It is either all about the museum, or all about the visitor. Dissecting both methodologies, Falk then advocates for a sweet spot in-between, saying “I would assert that the museum visitor experience is neither about visitors nor about museums and exhibitions, but rather it is situated within that unique and ephemeral moment when both of these realities become one and the same —visitors are the museum and the museum is the visitor” (Falk, p.35).

Falk spends his pages by delving deeper into how a visitor’s museum experience can, in truth, have nothing to do with the museum itself. Through numerous interviews with museum visitors, Falk investigates how people experience the museums they visit, what shapes their visit, and what they get out of spending their time in an exhibition. With this data, Falk creates five identity-related groups of museum visitors: explorer, facilitator, experience seeker, professional/hobbyist, and recharger. One can be several of this things at once, or single-purposed. It may seem obvious that visitors are not all tabula rasa, blank
slates that absorb curated exhibitions and information once inside the museum setting, but the idea that a visitor has an identity apart from being in the museum in that moment as a visitor is relatively new in the field of museology. Falk has collected ethnographic data, synthesized it, and created suggestions from it.

**Review: “Power and Authenticity: Moving from the Classroom to the Museum”**

by **Andrea Kenkmann**

Kenkmann’s article was not what I expected. She uses a theoretical foundation to approach how spatial environments can change how people learn. Her particular focus is a shift between the classroom environment to a museum and how theoretical constructs of power and authenticity play into the spatial shift. It is worth mentioning that Kenkmann’s definition of authenticity is based on an earlier, philosophical definition of the authentic in terms of selfhood. She cites Heidegger, specifically. As concerns power, which is the theoretical tool she focuses on most, Kenkmann uses the theory of Michel Foucault to dissect power and how it plays a part in both spatial environments (the classroom and the museum). The purpose of her article is clearly outlined. Kenkmann says, “the argument of this article is that space, power, and authenticity are interrelated” (Kenkmann, p. 280). She has a theoretical toolkit to deploy; the spatial relationship between classrooms and museums is the sandbox for applying that theory.

Kenkmann organizes her article into clear sections, focusing on the interrelationships between space and power, space and authenticity, and power and authenticity, respectfully. Her conceptualization of authenticity is a far cry from how I have come to handle the problematic construct, and so the article was not nearly as helpful as I had hoped it would be. Her use of theory to lay the foundation for her argument is concise
and well-crafted, however, and I would do well to learn from the clarity with which she outlines her research.

**Part 3**

Collecting data as an ethnographer is time-consuming but worthwhile. There is large collection of gadgets recommended for any ethnographer in the field, including an audio recorder, video recorder, camera, etc. The equipment used all depends on what the outcome of the ethnographic project is. My research interests are not likely to require video footage, for example, but taped interviews with museum visitors and museum staff would be useful data to collect. I am interested in incorporating personal narratives into my future research project, although fitting it into an “understanding the problem” research question might prove challenging. If my research interests were to span multiple approaches, i.e. “understanding the problem” to “finding a solution,” and so forth, then collecting ethnographic data would most likely inform what to do once the problem has been identified. Ethnographic techniques could also be employed to answer the important question of *why* museums are stepping into a paradigm shift. Interviewing museum staff, especially, would be a valuable component of looking at that question.

Structured more succinctly, my outline for collecting and analyzing ethnographic data would look something like this:

I. Identify problem
   
   A. Theoretical framework, possibly some case studies.

   II. Ask people how they feel about problem.
A. Identify most efficient way to prepare ethnographic case studies. (What museums to focus on specifically)

B. Prepare questions, but be prepared to listen to key informants.

C. Contact key informants. Museum staff is much easier than museum visitors. Arrange interviews with curatorial staff and educational programming. Talk to executive directors if possible about changing missions/visions within the museum world.

D. Create survey to reach museum visitors? Would not want to bias responses by just chatting with people I know.

III. Figure out how to document experiential authenticity.

A. Personal experience narratives?

IV. Do not forget about opportunities with digital ethnography, looking at accessibility and the distribution of visitor power concerning online collection databases for museums.

Museums have a history of being mausoleums for artifacts and material culture. As institutions, they function to preserve and interpret the past (and present), and to attempt to answer questions that emerge from a collection of knowledge and objects. But, as with anything in the realm of tradition, museums must change in order to continue.

Process Notes:

- folklore in the museum? Bridging the gap between official and unofficial culture. Opening the doors, paradigm shift in the museum world. Authority and authenticity, who chooses what to
display? Bringing people into the museum? Working with new media? How to share information in exhibits?

- Who gets to decide what information to share? Stewardship questions around museum authority and power.
- Theoretical backdrop possibilities: Foucault, Bourdieu, Oldenburg, Falk, Bendix, Simon
- When a museum takes on the task of interpreting the past, they are bringing along a bias and an assumed authority. How do you navigate that responsibility?
  - Depending on whether you are a resident there, having a constituency that considers other points of view. People who volunteer carry with them one or two pervious approaches about how history should be.
- How do you tell the stories that are uncomfortable? Especially when they are not "yours" to tell?
- "Earliest build isn't necessarily important, but the process of that change over time. Change over time is a phrase used today to recognize that history is a continuum." - Kingston Heath
  - Folkloric? Continuity and change over time, a necessary dynamism to the preservation of tradition. Also history, folklore, knowledge?
- Who gets to assign value to an arts experience, which is often intangible, in smaller organizations and how is this constructed idea of value reinforced by the larger culture industry in the United States?
- A shift in the museum dictating what their visitors should care about or see to one where the visitors help to dictate what the museum should care about. - Falk
- It's about authority. Museums need to come to terms with the fact that, in a digital world, authority has been redefined. It's about access, ubiquity, functionality. (Nik Honeysett)
  - Argumentum ad populum (if everybody believes something to true then it must be true)
- " Outsider authenticity," "negotiated authenticity," "staged authenticity"
- Safe interaction with the other. Distance. Who gets to be Other? Authenticity is often about ethnicity.
- Authenticity is experiential (Bendix)... Museums are experiential!
- I would imagine that in folklore exhibits, you are more likely to rescind authority over the content. The relationship is more complex.
References


