



Teaching Artifact – Assignment: Digital Ethnography

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Instructor Commentary

This Digital Ethnography assignment is the third assignment required in my WRT 330: Digital Culture (Identity and Community) class. Digital Culture is one of the upper-level courses in the Writing for Digital Media track of the Writing and Rhetoric Major at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan, and the course is described in the university catalog as “An examination of the rhetoric and ethics of Internet technology and culture. Introduces theories of digital culture and its effects on both online and actual identities and communities, especially in relation to ethnicity, gender, class, physical ability, and sexual orientation. Includes individual and collaborative analysis and construction of web projects” (Oakland University, 2015).

Course Goals

Students in this course:

- Study and apply theories of digital culture and its effects on online communities, especially in relation to ethnicity, gender, class, physical ability, and sexual orientation.
- Become familiar with the ways American notions of intellectual property, privacy, and community are being challenged in a digital age.
- Take a critical approach to understanding how and why computer technologies may transform American education, democracy, identity, and culture.
- Develop strategies for analyzing the rhetoric and ethics of digital documents, communities, and places.
- Use a knowledge of our evolving digital cultures to develop a variety of analytical and creative projects for the Web: visual arguments, digital stories, Websites, videos, blogs, and Wikis.
- Gain some experience working with software for the production of multimodal websites, wikis, videos, digital stories, and slideshows.

The **Digital Ethnography** is the last major assignment my students complete in this class. The first assignment asks that they compose a multimodal digital autobiography, a video or slideshow analyzing some aspect of their online identities. The second requires that they work with a group to research some form of emerging media, and the group researches and composes

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this project collaboratively, presenting their research in a wiki that includes text, images, and short videos. For the final assignment, students interact more directly with online communities, working as participant-observers to research, analyze, and present an online community to their classmates. In the past, students have collaborated to research sites like 4chan, Crunchyroll, Deviant Art, and the /r/trees community at Reddit, as well as fan sites for Harry Potter and *The X-Files*.

Because students in this class employ, produce, and distribute online texts, we begin the semester with a study of copyright and fair use which is informed by resources available at the Media Education Lab. The Digital Ethnography assignment builds on that initial ethics/legal training by requiring that students complete and pass the CITI training module for Human Subjects Research and that they develop their own Informed Consent forms to distribute to their research subjects.

Project 3: Digital Ethnography (20%)

Assignment Description

For this project, students work with a group of classmates to fully explore a variety of aspects of a single digital community online. Each group will examine all of the following:

- the digital "place" or "places" where the community meets (Facebook, Ning, wiki, listserv, website, Flickr, blog, chat rooms, Reddit, Twitter, Instagram, etc);
- the community's digital activities (writing, advocating, creating, etc.);
- the community's language (acceptable types of discourse, visual/verbal/oral forms of discourse, abbreviations or common—to that culture—expressions);
- the community's stated and implied values;
- the community's digital artifacts;
- the community's rules for acceptable behavior; and
- the community's rituals (celebrations, habits, quirks, etc.).

Each group begins by reading through informational links to:

- learn what an ethnography is (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnography>),
- explore what ethnographers do to gather their research (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Participant_observation), and
- study the ethical standards ethnographers follow (<http://www.sas.upenn.edu/anthro/anthro/ethicsinresearch>).

Students then start researching online to locate an online community that is active enough to support a thorough and interesting ethnography. The community chosen must be readily identifiable and researchable. The community must also be willing to permit research on them, interaction with them, and interviews and surveys on them.

Each group will gather mostly primary data (participant-observations, interviews, surveys, forum responses, etc.), but they may incorporate some secondary research as well (articles, reports, academic works).

Project Goals

Students will:

- Engage with an online community for the purpose of studying and analyzing the interactions within that community;

- Apply a variety of primary research strategies (participant observation, interview, survey) to learn more about an online community;
- Collaborate with a small group of classmates to develop a richly nuanced interpretation and analysis of an online community;
- Present their research and analysis in a multimodal medium; and
- Employ what they have learned about document, video, and audio design to develop a multimodal text that is consistent, pleasing, and entertaining.

Requirements and Special Challenges

Each group must:

- Take and pass (as individuals) the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) program for “Human Subjects Research” prior to beginning their research into an online community;
- Develop, distribute, and collect Informed Consent forms for all subjects that they interview for this project;
- Reveal themselves and their group’s purpose to the online community;
- Deal ethically and responsibly towards members of this community;
- Complete a minimum of three hours of online observation of this community in multiple sites (Facebook groups, forums, websites, Twitter, Instagram, etc.); and
- Contact and interview at least one central member of the community (such as the founder, forum manager, website manager, etc.).

Medium

Each group will compose one of the following:

- a hyperlinked article or website with at least three separate pages (and at least 2,000 words);
- a wiki article (with links to outside sources and at least two internal pages) of at least 2,000 words;
- a narrated slideshow that is at least 5 minutes long; or
- a documentary video that is at least 5 minutes long.

Reading/Viewing Assignments

In addition to the informational links above, each student will need to study the following:

1. The “Digital Ethnography Explained” video
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzFBUi0HcOA>)
2. The sample student digital ethnographies posted in Moodle from previous course sections
3. One of the following documentaries:
 - *World of Warcraft: Looking for Group* (<http://www.hulu.com/watch/710237>)
 - *MacHEADS* (<http://www.hulu.com/watch/94300>)
4. All three of these TED Talks:
 - Sherry Turkle: “Connected, But Alone”
(https://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_alone_together)
 - Seth Godin: “The Tribes We Lead”
(https://www.ted.com/talks/seth_godin_on_the_tribes_we_lead)
 - Howard Rheingold: “The New Power of Collaboration”
(https://www.ted.com/talks/howard_rheingold_on_collaboration)

Digital Ethnography Grading Standards

	4	3	2	1	0
The work illustrates	An advanced and mature level of engagement with the community being studied. The work presents findings that suggest these researchers understood the complex issues surrounding how the community interacts, communicates, and works; what the community values; and what it means to community members to belong to this group.	A strong engagement with the community being studied. The work presents findings that suggest these researchers understood some of the complex issues surrounding how the community interacts, communicates, and works; what the community values, and what it means to each member to belong to this group.	An effective, but unexceptional, level of engagement with the community being studied. The work presents findings that suggest these researchers came to understand a bit about how the community communicates and works what the community values, and what it may mean to each member to belong to this group.	A slight amount of engagement with the community being studied. The work presents some superficial findings that suggest these researchers may have struggled to understand how the community works together and what it means to each member to belong to this group.	Very little engagement with the community being studied.
The research illustrates	That these researchers applied a number of different techniques to their study of their chosen community, including observation, participant-observation, secondary research, survey, and interview. This work also illustrates that these researchers engaged with this community over an extended period of time, making theirs a richly nuanced interpretation of the community's values.	That these researchers applied a number of different techniques to their study of their chosen community, including observation, participant-observation, secondary research, survey, and interview. This work also illustrates that these researchers engaged with this community over a long period of time, making theirs nuanced interpretation of the community's values.	That these researchers applied a few different techniques to their study of their chosen community, including observation, participant-observation, secondary research, survey, and interview. This work also illustrates that these researchers engaged with this community over an average length of time, making theirs an adequate interpretation of the community's values.	That these researchers may not have applied a sufficient variety of different techniques to their study of their chosen community. This work also illustrates that these researchers may have engaged with this community over only a limited period of time.	That these researchers may not have applied much variety of techniques to their study of their chosen community. This work also illustrates that the various researchers may not have engaged much with this community.
The overall design	is pleasing, uniform, consistent, and intentional. All fonts are easy to read, the timing of the work makes it accessible to its audience, the images are clear, there are no audio issues, etc.	is attractive, uniform, consistent, and intentional. Most fonts are easy to read, the timing of the work makes it accessible to its audience, the images are clear, there are no audio issues, etc.	is somewhat appealing, uniform, and consistent. There may be some slight issues with fonts, timing, images, sound levels, etc. But these do not interfere with the reader/viewer/listener's understanding of the work.	is not very appealing and/or may lack consistency. Issues with fonts, timing, images, sound levels, etc. may interfere with the reader/viewer/listener's understanding of the work.	is unappealing, inconsistent, or accidental, rather than intentional. Issues with fonts, timing, images, sound levels, etc. distract from the message.
Various effects	are relevant, make sense in the context of this work (images, music, sounds, audio, etc)	are relevant, make sense in the context of this work (images, music, sounds, audio, etc)	are generally relevant, make some sense in the context of this work (images, music, sounds, audio, etc)	are sometimes relevant and/or may occasionally make sense in the context of this work (images, music, sounds, audio, etc)	Do not seem to fit the topic or purpose of the work, they may actually make little sense in the context of this work (images, music, sounds, audio, etc)
The entertainment value	is very high. The composers were aware of their audience and created a piece that would both entertain and inform that specific audience.	is high. The composers were aware of their audience and created a piece that would entertain and inform that specific audience.	is average. The composers were aware of their audience and attempted to create a piece that would both entertain and inform that specific audience.	may not be strong in the work. The composers may have been unaware of their audience and/or struggled to create a piece that would entertain and inform that specific audience.	is not evident. The composers were unaware of their audience and/or unable or unwilling to create a piece that would entertain and inform that specific audience.
The work illustrates	creativity through the use of a variety of interesting rhetorical, technical, and design challenges for the	creativity through the use of a good variety of rhetorical, technical, and design challenges for the	creativity through the blending of some rhetorical, technical, and design challenges for the	creativity through the use of a few rhetorical, technical, or design challenges for the composes. The composers	That the composers may have had difficulty with the creative aspects of this project, and encountered
	composers. The composers were consistently thinking outside of the box with content, form, and delivery of this text	composers. The composers generally thought outside of the box with content, form, and delivery	composers. The composers occasionally thought outside of the box with content, form, and/or delivery	may have experienced difficulty thinking outside of the box with content, form, and delivery.	few, if any, rhetorical, technical, or design challenges for the composer.

References

Media Education Lab (2008). Code of best practices for fair use in media literacy education. Retrieved from: <http://mediaeducationlab.com/code-best-practices-fair-use-media-literacy-education>

Oakland University. (2015). *2014–2015 Oakland University catalog*. Rochester, MI. Retrieved from: <http://catalog.oakland.edu>