

Faith Community Worship Service Observation Guidelines

As part of your faith community service learning project, you are to attend a worship service. You will need to structure your journal according to the guidelines below. Please note we will have an in-class workshop based on your observations and notes on Wed. Feb 3, so be sure to bring them to class.

Taking notes before, during and after your observation:

- 1) Before: write four or five questions (or more) that interest you to which you'd like to know the answers.
- 2) During: Context notes (name of faith community, time, date, location, rough sketch of worship hall)
- 3) During: Notes should be what you can see, hear, smell, touch, taste -- that which another person might also observe
- 4) After: **Immediately** after the event, go over your notes and fill in gaps, etc. You'll be amazed at how quickly details evaporate – flesh out your notes RIGHT AWAY. Plan to take at least a half hour to do this – sit in your car in the parking lot if you have to.
- 5) After: Write a journal entry based on your questions and observations in which you use what you observed *and* what we've been reading and talking about in class, to first summarize what you saw and then “make knowledge” about the specific events you observed, by using concepts and theories from class to explain or put into context what you saw, and to ask new questions.

Field Notes Protocol: Planning and Carrying Out Your Observations

- ✚ **Figure out what you want to know.** This should take the form of written questions. *You can't possibly write down every single word you hear, thought you have, detail you see. Knowing what questions you want to answer will help you gather data useful to thinking about our program inquiries – and to writing your journal entry.*
- ✚ A day or two before your observation, **write a page or so about what you expect to find**, and your feelings and thoughts about doing the observation. These are your pre-observation reflections. Attach them to your field notes, and hand them in together.
- ✚ **Arrive at the site early.**
 - Look for a program or rosters or other information about the event. (Attach one copy of these materials to your field notes, and hand them in together.)
 - Make some notes, including a map or drawing, describing the physical setting in general, and especially any aspects of it that relate to your questions.
- ✚ **Take notes during the event itself**, briefly if necessary so you don't miss relevant action.
 - Many people find it useful to take notes directly onto paper on which they've previously written their questions, thus providing some structure for their work. (Don't limit your notes to these only, though, if something else interesting and relevant comes up.)
 - You should make a careful distinction between your actual observations, and your own interpretations. These can be kept separate by drawing a line vertically down the middle of your paper. *Observations* are what you can see, hear, smell, touch, taste; that which another person might also observe. *Interpretations* are your own responses. The advantage of being careful here is that you will be less likely to let your own experiences or biases limit what you observe, or

distort the resulting knowledge you make. One way to keep these separate is to write down observations during the event and right afterward, adding interpretive reflections at home.

Observations	Interpretation/Reflections
Clergy stands behind pulpit to deliver sermon. Uses microphone because of the large congregation. She begins by quoting John 3:16, then discusses the theme of universal love. Her voice was strong, but mostly a monotone, until she got to the punch line at the end.	The minister reminded me of my third grade teacher, Mrs. Boss. I was intrigued by the Bible verse, as I hadn't heard it before. The rest of the sermon was mildly interesting but I found it hard to sustain interest because of the tone of her voice.

- ✦ **Answer honestly** if someone asks why you are taking notes – you should say you are an Evergreen student working on a paper for a class. It's fine to talk about the subject of your paper, our program, etc., if you want to. Don't miss what you came to observe!

Field Observation Background Information

Field observations involve skills used in many professions, including sociology, journalism and other types of writing (fiction and nonfiction), public health and health care, anthropology, and social work and counseling. Field observations, with interviews, are often used to gather information during large research projects.

For this program, you'll be attending a worship service, a children's or adult education class, a community service event or project organized by your faith community, taking notes, and then writing journal entries. In a larger project, you would do a great deal of reading (to place your work in the context of theory and other people's work), in-depth interviewing, and quite a few more observations, and your overall goal would be to understanding the meanings of actions and events *as the people involved understand their meanings*. In Religion and Society, our goals are to try out field observation as a research skill or tool, to learn a bit about religion and collective group worship activities by setting aside our usual ways of thinking about and/or participating in religious activities, and to make some knowledge of our own by applying theory and insights developing from work in the classroom to what we have observed outside it.

Field observations can be:

1. "Passive" observations in which the researcher is *not* part of the action or group being observed (except insofar as his or her presence unavoidably affects what is happening), OR "active participant" observations in which the researcher *does* take part in the action as more or less a part of the group. **Note that in Religion and Society we are combining both approaches - the "passive" observation stance in your observational work within the congregation and "active" in your service work to your faith community.**
2. Either overt (people being observed understand that the observer is conducting research, and for what purpose) or covert (observer does not reveal what s/he is doing, even if asked). **In the field observation assignments for Religion and Society, we are taking the second approach . . . but you should feel free to identify yourself as an Evergreen student working on a paper, and to answer questions, if you are asked what you're doing. In the service work to your faith community, you are to take the overt approach, including regular communication with your field supervisor or other members of the congregation.**

Remember that when engaging in qualitative field observation and research you are not trying to discover The Truth. In fact, one of the assumptions of the qualitative research approach is that reality is subjective and constructed by individuals; many realities and truths exist at any one time, and the same individual

may understand the same event differently at different times. No human being can be completely objective, no human being can observe something without to some extent – by her or his very presence – changing it, and no human being can recreate events or other people’s actions in their entirety. What you are looking for and working with when you conduct qualitative research is understanding, insight and meaning. One increasingly common method of judging the validity of the researcher’s understanding and conclusions about meaning is to ask for the opinion and feedback of the research subjects (the people who were studied) on the researcher’s product.

Here’s a list of some of things researchers might look for during field observations related to something that is NOT our topic: whether or not the group of people being observed could be considered a “community”. You of course will need to tailor the specific data you record to a religious environment, and to your own questions about attitudes toward collective religious activities within your faith community.

- Who is present; who is absent? Think of the usual categories – sex, age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status/class, physical ability and health status, and so on.
- Nature of interactions between people. Who talks, to whom, and for how long? What are the intensity levels? How closely do people sit or stand to each other? How frequently do people talking to each other make eye contact? Smile? What’s the noise level?
- Physical positioning. Who is sitting, who is standing? Who is moving around? Why?
- Insider/outsider demarcations. Do some people seem to be more central to or more in control of the action than others? Do some people seem to be less involved? What do the “central” do that the “on-the-margin” people don’t do?
- Community rules or boundaries. What topics are being addressed? What specific rules or boundaries related to community/group membership are in operation? Are there specific words or language people are using which reveal attitudes toward those rules or boundaries? Toward the group/community itself?
- If you were a journalist visiting from a very different culture, what clues would you have found here that told you this event mattered (or didn’t) to the people in attendance?