TEACHING INNOVATIONS HIGHLIGHT

Research Projects in ANTH 4010 “Language and Culture”:
The Case for a Student Research Institutional Review Board Process

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In the essay below, we will describe an innovative model of teaching that involves students in field research projects where they “learn by doing.” When we learned of the publication of a new undergraduate journal at the University of North Texas, we had hoped to publish one or two of the best papers from this course in the journal. We discovered that we could not publish the papers because the course projects had not gone through a formal review by the UNT Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human subjects. This experience led us to propose revisions to the IRB process at UNT that we believe would significantly improve undergraduate research on the campus.

Description of Student Research Process

In the undergraduate anthropology course “Language and Culture,” students learn about the field of linguistic anthropology not only by reading classic articles in the field, but also by working all semester on a research project. This experiential learning activity enables students to deepen their understanding of the relationship between research and theory development. The project requires students to choose some group or setting with an identifiable culture; observe and record at least two activities of this group; analyze its communication patterns; and write a report that shows how the communication patterns reflect the culture of the group. Over the years, students in this class have conducted fieldwork with a wide range of groups and settings including Boy Scout troops, sports teams, music groups, doctor’s offices, a quilt guild, a motorcycle club, actors rehearsing a play, and beauty salons.

In order to help students manage the research process, the project has been divided into a series of separate assignments, with due dates spread out over the course of the semester. At the beginning of the semester, students receive detailed project instructions with a description of each assignment, including how many percentage points each one counts toward their grade.

The assignments are also discussed in class. Students are shown examples from previous years as models, and are given training in fieldwork skills. The specific items that students turn in are:

1. **Description of fieldsite.** A short summary of the groups that students decide to study. This assignment ensures that students choose a group early in the semester and start to think about its culture and communication patterns.
2. **Permission from fieldsite.** Students go through the informed consent process with their subjects and turn in consent forms.
3. **Annotated bibliography.** Students conduct background research to find out what has previously been learned about the group they are studying.
4. **First fieldnotes.** By this time, students must have conducted their first observation and recording of an activity of the group. They turn in detailed descriptions of the activity.
5. **First transcript.** About a week later, the students turn in a transcription of the activity. Four pages of transcripts are required. This is usually only a short portion of their recording, so they can choose the sections they consider most interesting.
6. **Second fieldnotes.** Description of the second activity they observed and recorded.
7. **Second transcript.** Same process as first transcript.
8. **Final report.** This is where the students tie everything together. They show how the conversations they recorded reveal and reflect the culture of the group they studied. They draw on their bibliography and course readings in order to relate their study to previous research.

By breaking the research process into this series of steps, students are able to complete a sizable project by the end of the semester. Their final reports often show an impressive

sophistication as they combine the theoretical and methodological tools they have learned with their own analytical and creative abilities. In the most recent class, offered in spring 2004, two of the many outstanding research projects were done by students Megan Ko and Joshua Miner. Megan Ko conducted research on a feminist group at a university campus. With the knowledge and consent of the group's members, she attended their meetings and joined their listserv to receive their email communications. Joshua Miner examined workplace interactions in a custom cabinetry design company. He observed a number of events "including the most formal of administration meetings, the most ceremonial of award services, and the most informal of personal exchanges between fellow workers."

The Role of the Institutional Review Board in Student Research

Initially, Susan Eve (editor of this journal) and Christina Wasson (teacher of the course) hoped that Megan Ko and Joshua Miner would be able to include their reports in this issue. However, we discovered that this was not possible because the course had not gone through the university's IRB process, the federally-mandated administrative procedure that ensures protection of human subjects in research. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) does not generally encourage faculty to submit their course projects for review because it would significantly increase the already heavy workload of the committee. UNT's IRB has not created a track for submitting class projects. Some universities do have special track for student projects. At UNT, if course projects have not been submitted to the IRB *before* the research is conducted, students are not able to publish their research results afterwards. This means that students cannot take advantage of unexpected publication opportunities that may emerge after the course is over, since IRB approval cannot be made retroactively.

This is an issue that merits further consideration. One option would be to encourage all class projects involving human subjects to go through the IRB review, so that students' rights would be protected with regard to publication opportunities that emerge later on. This would mean dedicating more resources to the IRB and perhaps creating a separate submission track for classes, since students need a quick response due to semester time limitations. The committee to evaluate student applications might also have student members, so that students could learn about the work of IRBs from the inside. Based on our experience, we recommend formation of a committee to consider this issue.

The issue here is one of compliance with federally-mandated administrative procedures rather than substantive ethics. To use the "Language and Culture" course as an example, students received extensive training in the ethical issues surrounding the treatment of human subjects. They obtained informed consent from the people they observed and recorded, and turned in consent forms. And the students who hoped to publish their papers in this journal went back to the subjects and obtained permission to publish.

Although it was painful not to be able to include the two student papers in *The Eagle Feather*, the fact that this issue came up is a positive sign that UNT is strengthening its focus on undergraduate research. It may be regarded as one of the growing pains of a university that is increasingly helping students develop research skills and publications. These are significant benefits to students, and will contribute to UNT's ongoing efforts to raise its research profile and attract excellent students.