

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH TRAINING AT A NATIONAL PARK

By Robert T. Trotter, II

Conceptual Framework

There is good evidence anthropology is behind the other social science disciplines in institutionalizing formal training in research methods. Sociocultural anthropologists in particular appear loath to abandon teaching students about anthropology in favor of teaching them how to become anthropologists.

In response to this situation, colleagues and I at Northern Arizona University (NAU) decided to explore innovative undergraduate research training programs during the summer of 1989. We created two field schools which were jointly sponsored by the NAU Anthropology Department and Wupatki National Monument (located near Flagstaff, Arizona). Both were funded through a grant from the U. S. Department of Education. One project was an archaeological field school for minority undergraduate students; the other, a minority student undergraduate ethnographic research training program, is the subject of this report.

The ethnographic field school emulated the general principles for methodological training developed in the NSF-sponsored program, *Primary Data Construction in Anthropology (Camp Methods)* hosted for the past four years at the University of Florida. Our project was expected to determine which of the skills recommended for professional anthropologists could be built into an undergraduate field training curriculum. It was designed to be small and intense and to be based on both a mentor and a peer support model. I directed the research education, supported by two NAU anthropology graduate assistants, Ms. Duffie Westheimer and Ms. Lisa Leap. Six undergraduate minority students received ethnographic field training.

The field training was constructed to accomplish four broad educational objectives. Students were to learn how to evaluate the content and methods of ethnographic research. They were to devise and conduct a focused ethno-

graphic research project. They were to use computers in field data management and learn advanced descriptive techniques such as pile sorts, triads tests, or other cognitive modeling programs. Finally, they were to produce a written applied ethnography from their own primary data and present it orally before a professional audience.

Our seven-week field research plan was focused on understanding the behavior of visitors in and around the Wupatki National Monument Visitor Center and two outlying archaeological sites. Interviews with National Park Service personnel determined the starting points for our research. Park personnel wanted to know how long people stayed at the ruins, where they went, what interested them, what types of interpretation worked well, and how visitors behaved. They felt this information would help them improve their interpretive materials and develop better management plans for the park.

Field Training and Data Collection

Students received an introduction to reading ethnographies, with special emphasis on critical thinking and learning to critique previous ethnographic research for a) clarity of methods discussions, b) strength of coverage, c) support of theoretical positions, and d) advancement of knowledge. They were introduced to methods of data collection and recording, and to issues of ethics and confidentiality. These introductions combined lecture and reading materials with group discussions and role exercises in the first week, along with reinforcement through individual and group discussions in following weeks. Theoretical concerns related to methods were dealt with through mini-lectures given during the field work plus individual on-site discussions about the theoretical applications of the data the students were recording.



Student Interviews Park Visitors

Photo by Robert Trotter

The accompanying schedule provides a day-by-day outline of the program we used to accomplish our objectives. Actual field experiences started in the second week of training.

A typical day in the field consisted of gathering everyone together about 7 a.m. and traveling out to the Wupatki Visitor Center. Following an early morning meeting to plan that day's observations and/or interviewing, students dispersed to their locations in the park. On some days a lecture or discussion took place prior to the collection of data. At noon everyone got together for a sack lunch. This was a time when we informally checked on the students' progress and when the students shared a number of humorous or serious encounters and happenings from the morning. (The research assistants and I also "cruised" at various times during the day to make our own observations and to provide support to the students.) After lunch, individuals either returned to research sites or worked on field notes, or both. In the mid-afternoon (4 p.m. or so) we returned to campus, and students were responsible for word processing their field notes and transcribing interviews for the day.

During the first weeks of the program students learned unobtrusive processes for data collection and data recording (mapping, process descriptions, simple counts, and timing activities). They made direct observations, periodically timed visitors, unobtrusively followed their movements through the ruin, listened to public conversations, and asked exploratory questions. The students used these preliminary data to devise questions for in-depth interviews about visitor experiences in the park and to focus additional direct observations of visitor behavior. They learned how to approach informants; explain their presence and purposes; and collect, record, transcribe, code, retrieve, and review field observations and interviews.

One of the more innovative aspects of the field school was that it introduced the students to computer-assisted

ethnographic data collection, storage, and retrieval. They learned word processing, file formation, coding, retrieval, and preliminary analysis. The computer programs the students used included WordPerfect (a word processor); CONCORD (a concordance builder); ResNoter (for the creation and management of bibliographic data and research notes); and Anyword (a text oriented data base manager that allows rapid search, cut and paste, and some data base capabilities). Students received direct instruction on each of these, except ResNoter. In addition, students were introduced to some of the special shareware programs created by anthropologists for generating and analyzing data for triad tests, pile sorts, and similar exercises.

Analysis and Report Writing

Data management and analysis processes were given serious attention throughout the field school. Students were required to turn in assignments on a regular basis. We tried to review and turn back field notes every two days; occasionally that stretched to every three days. When the field notes were returned, they had our comments, directed at six major issues, in the margins. We were looking for both positive and negative examples of thick description of behavior and environment; for good examples of speculation about patterns and processes (separate from the purely descriptive notes); for full recording of interview data; for clear transcriptions of informant interactips (behavior as well as words); for contextualization of notes; and for examples of strong and weak questions and overall interview interactions. The students were required to sit with either me, one of the two graduate assistants, or both, and go over the notes and comments. This also provided an opportunity to discuss any problems the student might be having, including the ethical as well as methodological dilemmas that the students encountered on almost a daily basis.

We have found that one of the weakest aspects of students' preparation

for field research (undergraduate and graduate) is in analyzing and writing up the results of their research. We provided the students with training and support in writing reports from the data they collected. During the final two weeks of the project, students spent increasing amounts of time building an ethnography, turning it in for critique, and reworking it. The final products for the program were a formal paper submitted to the Park Service and an oral presentation derived from that paper. The oral presentations were given to a professional audience of faculty and park personnel, with very positive results.

Research Results

The students focused their research on topics that allowed us to understand what tourists do during their brief stay, what they want to know about archaeological sites, what forms of interpretation they like and dislike, and the reasons for their preferences. Their results are compiled in a series of ethnographic reports, housed in the Wupatki National Monument Library. The reports are rich in detail and have direct practical use in addressing Park Service management concerns.

Visitors played out a number of American cultural patterns as they toured the ruins. The most visible patterns were consistent differences in sex role behavior and age related behavior. Some of the male/female and adult/child patterns of interaction are interestingly similar to behaviors discovered inside an anthropological museum (Cone, this issue), and we hope to follow up on some comparisons during future seasons.

We also made discoveries about differences in the use of interpretive material, differences in the questions asked, and differences in the information the visitors wanted about prehistoric lifestyles. One report gives an analysis of the patterns of visitation of German tourists and the reason so many of them are interested in U.S. prehistoric parks. Others provide profiles of individuals who are likely to abuse the



Students in Seminar

Photo by Robot Trader

ruins. Still others include an exploration of the ambiguity over the largely invisible behavioral boundaries within the park that are supposed to prevent people from getting into places that would harm the natural resources in the park. We wanted to discover why these boundaries were ambiguous and what kinds of clarification were necessary to reduce vandalism in the park.

Each of the student papers provides recommendations for preservation of current services and recommendations for change. Some recommendations come from the park visitors themselves, telling in their own words what they liked and disliked and what they want to see preserved. Other recommendations come from the student ethnographers. For example, the students recommended ways of establishing passive control mechanisms to reduce vandalism and accidental harm to prehistoric resources in the park. They recommended changes in patrol schedules to address periodic problems from "monster" children who tend to visit the park in the afternoon. They made suggestions for better and more coordinated publicity about parks and for improved interpretive materials for families, children, and foreign visitors.

The Park Service administration has already implemented several suggestions from the ethnographic research. These include better definitions of trail boundaries in outlying sites, changes in patrol times, and plans for new interpretive materials. In addition, the success of the summer's field season has led to an invitation to use the park as a field school site for future summers.

Conclusions

This experiment in applied ethnographic research training for undergraduate students was a clear success. We intend to repeat it with refinements when funding permits. The students executed very high quality direct observations and interviews and successfully used computers for ethnographic data management and analysis. They were able to start from scratch, do a focused ethnography on park visitor behavior, and produce a report of very reasonable quality, all in a seven-week period.

The success of the program was in part due to borrowing from the Florida NSF program model created by Russ Bernard, Bert Pelto, Lee Sailor, and Steve Borgatti. It included the use of

computers from start to finish, which greatly speeded analytical processes and made write-up of the ethnographic materials easier, especially the cutting and pasting routines that are so common to ethnographic research. In addition, use of computers made it possible for us to expose the students to some advanced ethnographic techniques. Time became our only major constraint. While the students were able to construct their field notes, code them, and analyze them using computer techniques, we did not have time for them to try out some of the advanced techniques (pile sorts, triads, network analysis, etc.). Those had to remain simple demonstrations, rather than hands-on exercises.

The fact that the program was for minority students was due to a funding opportunity available exclusively for students from groups that are underrepresented in graduate programs. The purpose of the grant was to provide an experience that would encourage the students to pursue graduate careers. The program was equally successful in this respect, since three of the students have already entered graduate programs in anthropology. The other three students have not graduated as yet, but it is highly likely that at least one more will go on to graduate school. Based on our experience with the field school, we feel that the basic design would be successful for any group of undergraduate students who wanted high quality ethnographic research training.

If more students entered our graduate program with the basic skills acquired by these undergraduates in one summer, it would be much easier to teach them advanced techniques, secure graduate funding for them, and provide them with the highest quality internships and theses assignments. They would all be several steps ahead of their peers who receive virtually no undergraduate research experience in ethnographic data collection and analysis. This is in contrast to our incoming archaeology students, most of whom have had significant field experience as undergraduates. The field of cultural anthropology in general, and applied anthro-

pology in particular, would benefit from more undergraduate ethnographic research training.

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Training Program Schedule

WEEK 1:

- June 18 Arrival and Check-in
- 19 Enrollment, Orientation to Campus
Orientation to Flagstaff
Bar-B-Que
- 20 Introduction to Archaeology Field School
Introduction to Ethnographic Field School
Introduction to Ethnography
Introduction to Computers (DOS Workshop)
- 21 Field Trip and Orientation to Wupatki and Sunset
Crater National Monuments
- 22 Introduction to Ethnography (cont.)
Ethics, Confidentiality
Field Notes: Structure/Format;
Introduction to Direct Observation
More Computer Introduction (WordPerfect 5.0)
- 23 More on Field Notes, Personal Logs, and Coding
Introduction to Mapping
Direct Observation Exercises
Field Logistics/Assignments
- 24 Hike to Crack-In-Rock (Wupatki National Monument)
- 25 Free Day

WEEK 2:

- June 26 Field Note Organization
Field Observations (Wupatki Visitor Center)
Mapping (2 locations)
- 27 Field Observations Continue
Direct Observation—Visitor Behavior Patterns (Primary Site)

- Applying to Graduate School (Afternoon Seminar)
- 28 Field Observations Continue
Direct Observations-Visitor Behavior (Primary Site)
- 29 Field Observations Continue (Secondary Site Observations)
- 30 Trip to Grand Canyon
- July 1-2 Weekend—Free Time

WEEKS:

- July 3 Introduction to Ethnographic Interviews
Processing Field Observations
Review of Observational Data
- 4 Bar-B-Que and Fireworks
- 5 More on Ethnographic Interviewing
Interviewing Exercises—Role Playing
Techniques of Transcription
- 6 Descriptive Questions
Field Interviewing Begins at Wupatki
- 7 Field Interviewing Continues
- 8-9 Weekend—Free Time

WEEK 4:

- July 10 Descriptive Questions-Interviewing Continues
- 11 Descriptive Questions-Interviewing Continues
Graduate School Programs (Afternoon Seminar)
- 12 Descriptive Questions-Interviewing Continues
- 13 Focused Questions-Interviewing Continues
- 14 Catch-Up Day—Field Note Processing
Introduction to CONCORD
- 15-16 Weekend—Free Time

WEEKS:

- July 17 Domain Analysis
Focused Questions—Interviewing Continues
- 18 Interviewing Continues
- 19 Introduction to Thematic Analysis
Interviewing Continues
- 20 Free Listings, Pile Sorts, etc.
Demonstrations of Advanced Ethnographic Techniques
Review of Interview Data
Catch-Up Day—Field Note Processing
- 22-23 Weekend—Free Time

WEEK 6:

- 24 Observations and Interviews—Filling in Gaps
- 25 Observations and Interviews—Filling in Gaps
Graduate Schools Information (Afternoon Seminar)
- 26 Introduction to Analysis
Computer Assistance for Cut and

- Paste (AnyWord)
- 27 Writing an Ethnography
Additional Computer Techniques
- 28 Data Analysis—Write up Ethnographies
- 29-30 Weekend—Write up Ethnographies

WEEKV.-

- July 31 Write-up: Preliminary Ethnography
- Aug. 1 Review of Ethnographies
Practice Presentation
Beginning Re-write
- 2 Re-write Ethnographies
- 3 Summer Program Symposium: Papers Presented
- 4 Summer Program Symposium

Student Ethnographic Reports

Brown, Wendi-Star

- 1989 The Business of Questions and Answers: An Ethnographic Study of the Information Desk at Wupatki National Monument Visitor Center.

Cha, Dia

- 1989 Wupatki National Monument, A Place of Fascination and Wonders: You Have Got to See It.

Hopkins, L.J.

- 1989 Wupatki Trail Boundaries: Steps in the Right Direction.

Orozco, Rene

- 1989 The Romantic West The European Seekers.

Valero, Gloria

- 1989 Wukoki: An Expression of Tranquility.

Winkfield, Karen Marie

- 1989 Child Monsters: Observing Family Tourism at Wupatki