



Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries



ERIAL Research Methods

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What is Ethnography?

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The art and science of describing a group, culture, or social process.

Ethnography: Basic Tenets

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- Longer engagement with participants
- Use local (“native”) categories
- Intensive participation and observation
 - “Participant Observer”
 - Doing, Seeing, Talking
- Examine both the insider’s perspective and the analyst’s explanation

Ethnography: Methods

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- Fieldnotes
- Multiple methods and data sources
 - Interviews
 - Participant observation
 - Drawings, Maps, Photographs, Videos
- Data collection and analysis often occur simultaneously

Why Ethnography?

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Ethnography provides:

- A holistic portrait of human behavior
- A nuanced view of complex social practices and processes
- An understanding of the richness and diversity of individuals' experiences

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Empirical data

Real people in real situations

ERIAL Data Collection

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- 9 Data Collection Methods
- 719 Research Contacts (over 600 unique participants)
- 280 Semi-structured Ethnographic Interviews
 - 49 Librarians
 - 75 Faculty Members
 - 156 Students
- 60 Research Process Interviews

Ethnographic Methods

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Observational Methods

- Participant Observation
- Research Process

Elicitation Methods

- Mapping
- Photography

Retrospective Methods

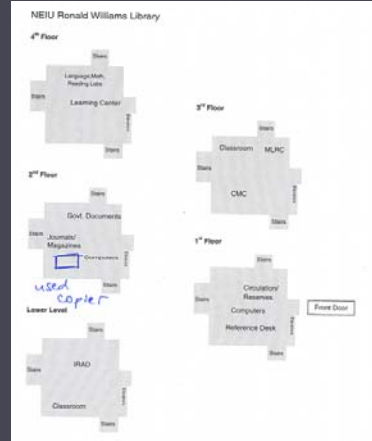
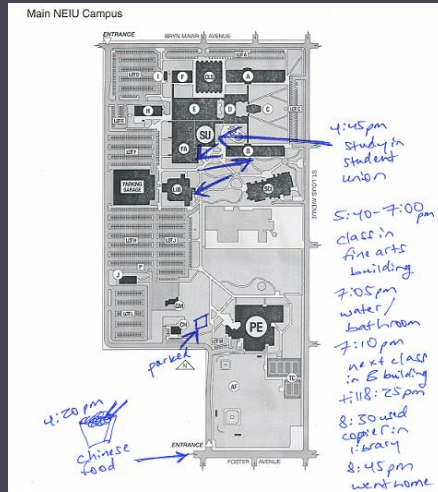
- Interviews

Visual Methods

- Library Maps
- Design Focus Groups

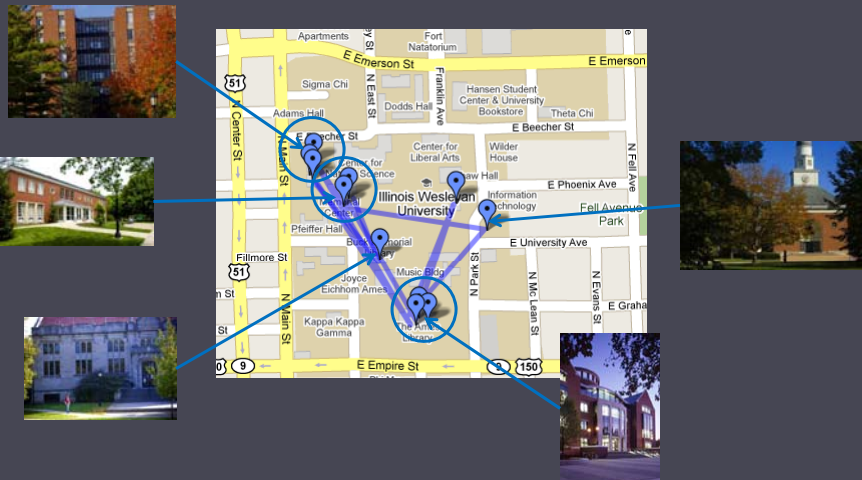
Elicitation Methods Mapping Diary

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Elicitation Methods Mapping Diary

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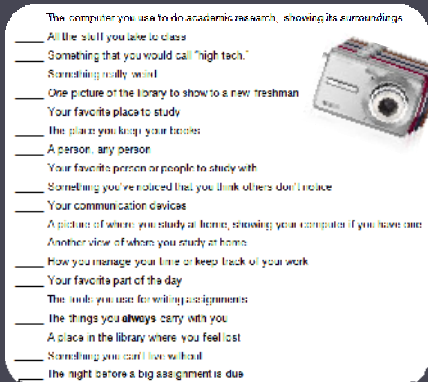


Elicitation Methods

Photo Survey

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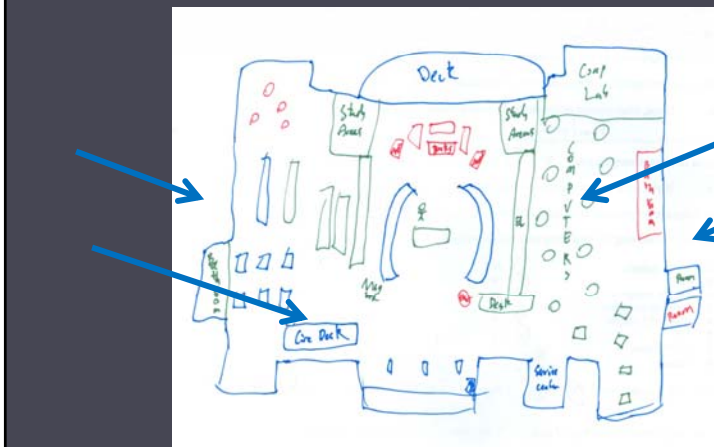
- Provide context in which a process is happening
- Follow-up interviews ask participants to describe and respond to photos
- Interview is more important than the photos themselves



This list reproduced from *Studying Students* by Foster and Gibbons (2007)

Visual Methods

Cognitive Maps

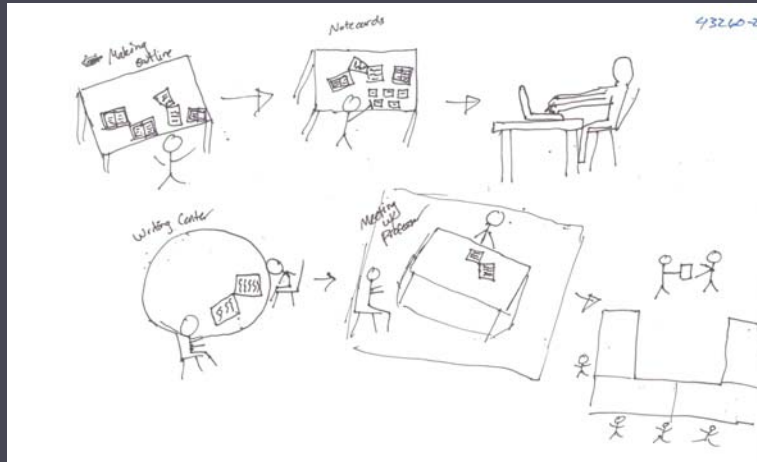


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Visual Methods

Retrospective Research

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Retrospective Methods

Interviews

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The bread and butter of qualitative research:

- Flexible
- Adaptable
- All-around method

Semi-structured

- List of topics
- Follows topics flexibly
- Follows up on interesting responses



Observational Methods

Research Process Interviews

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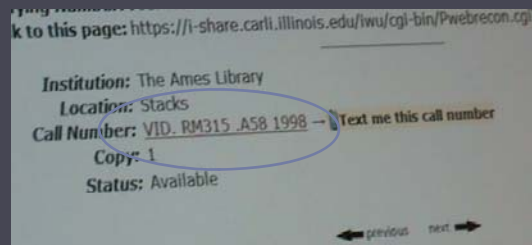
Example:

- First-year IWU student attempting to locate a video to use as a source for a research assignment.
- Confused about where to look for materials in the catalog, as well as LC call numbers.
- Student has already had two library instruction sessions.

Step 1: Identifies Item in Catalog

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- Misinterprets call Number as “Video Room 315.”
- “RM” shelving is located on the fourth floor.
- Not sure about where to go, the student goes to the reference desk for help.



Step 2: At the Reference Desk

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- The student staffing the reference desk is not there, leaving no one to help.
- The student consults a bookmark giving call number locations, decides that the item is on the fourth floor based on where “V” call numbers are shelved.



“I’m guessing--it starts with VID so that’s on the fourth floor.”

Step 3: Try the Circ Desk

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- Decides to ask at the circulation desk.
- Is given incorrect information: *“Videos are on the third floor.”*
- Videos are shelved in the stacks by call number.

Step 4: Ask at the Media Center

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- The student goes to the third floor, but is confused because she can't find "Room 315."
- Asks for help at the media center, but the student tells her that she should ask at circulation.

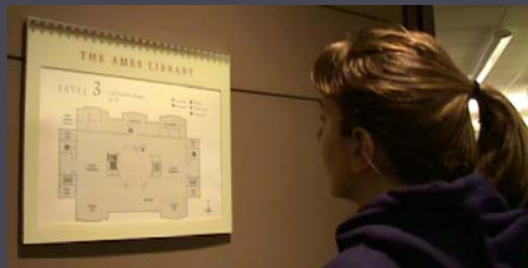
"The circulation desk downstairs deals with where things are. We're mainly to check out equipment. . .things like laptops. I'm sorry."

Step 5: Read the Floor Plan

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- The student consults the third floor signage, but can't find the call number on the map because it shows only one floor.

"This is not helping me. . ."



Step 6: Return to the Circ Desk

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- The student returns to circulation desk, and is finally given correct information
- Finds video in the stacks
- Total time to find item:
10 minutes
- Very few students will persist this long



Summary

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- A minor gap in the student's information literacy knowledge led to a major problem in finding the material.
- Student approached three different service points and did not receive adequate help with her problem.
- Small obstacles can lead directly to a failed search, negatively affecting students' learning outcomes.

Service Implications

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- Additional directional signage.
- Maps and/or locations displayed in catalog page alongside call number.
- Common basic service requirements and training at all service points.
- Increased training for library student employees.

Questions?

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