Student Ethnographic Research Experiences at the University of Puget Sound

Andrew M. Gardner

University of Puget Sound, gardner@pugetsound.edu

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Andrew Gardner

Affiliation
University of Puget Sound

Correspondence
gardner@pugetsound.edu

Abstract
This brief essay describes programming at the University of Puget Sound that allows undergraduate students to pursue independent ethnographic research projects. This programming undergirds all three of the subsequent student essays included in this issue. The mission of this programming is to encourage “experiential learning”—an objective that is aligned (and perhaps derivative) of the methodological toolkit long deployed by anthropological ethnographers. The essay describes the pedagogic goals that I have been able to integrate into the supervision of this experiential programming, and also discusses how we have sought to balance independently-derived student research interests with the broader research agendas codified in the Ethnographic Survey of Rural Cascadia (ESRC). The essay seeks to make useful observations about how one might teach ethnography, and about how, via collaboration and in the context of teaching this research method, undergraduate ethnographic novices might usefully contribute to our collective scholarly understanding of the human condition.

Keywords
Ethnography, teaching, pedagogy, undergraduate training, anthropology.

The University of Puget Sound is a private liberal arts institution located in Tacoma, Washington. Although it hosts a handful of master’s degree programs, the institution has primarily served undergraduates for the arc of its existence. Through a series of Mellon Foundation grants that provided seed monies, the university established new programming intended to enhance the institution’s capacity to deliver “experiential learning.” The resulting programming included a variety of new opportunities for students. Other programming focuses on student internships, on the study abroad experience, and on community-based learning.

be conducted over the summer. The funding provided by these small grants is intended to allow students to spend at least ten weeks focused directly on a research project that is, typically, of their own design. Those projects also require the supervision of a faculty member. In some cases, those faculty members are deeply invested in projects that were collaboratively conceived. In other cases, the faculty member merely serves as an experienced advisor for students beginning to explore the world of scholarly and academic research.

The contemporary valorization of “experiential learning” in American academia meshes well with the discipline of anthropology
and its principal research method. More than a century ago, Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) codified the value of experiential learning when he discerned the central place of participant observation in the ethnographic toolkit. Ethnographers are the quintessential “experiential learners,” and have been polishing this particular research tool for more than a century now. Like many anthropological ethnographers before me, in graduate school I read and discussed ethnographic methods in a pair of courses that split that methodological field between its quantitative and qualitative tools. And like many other anthropological ethnographers, none of those classroom discussions concretized my ethnographic capacities in the same way that hands-on experience conducting fieldwork eventually did. Over more than a decade supervising independent research projects at the University of Puget Sound, I’ve been able to help students pursue a constellation of fascinating independent research projects. For example, Alena McIntosh spent her summer in Kathmandu, Nepal, where she sought to understand how sustained outmigration has reshaped the urban landscape. Oscar Edwards-Hughes endeavored to better understand how interstitial urban spaces were vital to the well-being of the homeless Americans who populate Tacoma, Washington. Guy Crawford assembled an oral history of his neighborhood in Compton, Los Angeles, California, and sought to explore how the pockets of relative safety in the neighborhood are fostered or have otherwise persevered. In another example, Becca Murphy and I assessed three modernist parcels in Washington State history, and published our findings in volume 57, number 1 of the *Journal of Northwest Anthropology* (JONA) (Gardner and Murphy 2023).

The three essays included here are emblematic of the aspirations embedded in Puget Sound’s summer research program, and together they portray that program’s synergy with the ethnographic skill set. In all three of these projects, students ventured into the field alone, becoming the “professional strangers” that we ethnographers were once termed (Agar 1980). All three students whose essays are included here faced the commonplace ethnographic dilemma that Malinowski first described about his initial entry into a Trobriand village more than a century ago (Malinowski 1922). Like him, they had no personal connections to their subjects and these places, and the task before them was to conjure something substantial from a blank slate. All three faced the unpredictable challenges and unforeseen opportunities that reverberate through the experiences of almost all neophyte ethnographers (see Gardner and Hoffman 2006). Building on my own experiences in graduate school, I also endeavored to spend some time in the field with each of these three students, and to thereby pass along some of the fragments or insights that travel through the generations of our ethnographic guild. For example, Megan Sudac’s project—concerning territoriality and localism in West Coast surfing culture—was far from my own life experiences, but over a day at Ocean Shores, Washington, we visited some of the key breaks and the parking lots where surfing culture coagulates there; we dropped by several of the stores that serve this population and talked with the personnel therein; and we visited a local museum to garner a deeper history of this oceanside colony.

While Meg’s project channeled her own interests and hobbies, the other two essays included here describe independent research projects that occupy a slightly different conceptual

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2 Elsewhere, I’ve suggested we reserve the term anthropological ethnography for those ethnographic endeavors which deploy that toolkit in crossing thresholds of cultural difference on a mission of understanding. This is to be contrasted with ethnographers who work in their own communities, or via “autoethnography,” with those ethnographers who imagine themselves to be their own subject—a radically suspicious new sort of “key informant” (see Gardner 2023).

3 My first sustained ethnographic experiences occurred in southern Louisiana under the supervision of Dr. Diane Austin, and then in Saudi Arabia under the supervision of Dr. Timothy Finan.
space. With her month in Coulee City, Washington, and with his time on the Palouse in the community of St. John, Washington, both Madeline P. Davis and Jack Leal were pursuing independent projects conceived as episodic contributions to a larger, longitudinal project entitled the Ethnographic Survey of Rural Cascadia (ESRC). This project, already described in some length in JONA Special Publication #7, maps students’ independent contributions onto a larger longitudinal project with its own distinct objectives (see Gardner 2023). Put another way, in addition to the pedagogic goals described above—essentially, to give students firsthand experience with the tumultuous endeavor of ethnographic fieldwork—this larger longitudinal project aspires to help contemporary academic scholars develop a better understanding of rural America, to grapple with the nuances of rural community life in America today, and to deflate some of the militancies and stereotypes that permeate much of American academia today. As a longitudinal project, the ESRC seeks to use the ethnographic toolkit for the very purposes for which it was pioneered long ago: to cross thresholds of cultural difference on a humanistic mission of exploring alterity, and, perhaps, to contribute in some small way to bridging the cultural and ideological differences that seem to adhere to the rural/urban divide in the contemporary American polity.

Altogether, as a testament to these various ambitions, these three essays are less about the findings these students sighted via their ethnographic fieldwork, and more about their experiences as neophyte ethnographers at work far from their cultural homes. I was happy to have an opportunity to facilitate all three of these projects.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Gardner is a Professor of Anthropology at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington. A sociocultural anthropologist and ethnographer by training, for more than two decades Andrew’s fieldwork has been focused on the places, peoples and societies that interact in the petroleum-rich states of the Arabian peninsula. He has conducted extensive fieldwork in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Qatar, throughout South Asia, and elsewhere. Between 2008 and 2010 he also served as an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Qatar University. In addition to numerous journal articles and book chapters, he is the author of City of Strangers: Gulf Migration and the Indian Community in Bahrain (Cornell 2010), and The Fragmentary City: Migration, Modernity, and Difference in the Urban Landscape of Doha, Qatar (Cornell 2024). His longstanding scholarly pursuits explore the transnational migration, urban planning and urban life, and the social formations on both ends of the migration flows that lead to the Arabian Peninsula. He has been invited to speak at Oxford; the London School of Economics; the Sorbonne; the University of Cologne; Qatar University; the National University of Singapore; Kyoto University; Duke University; the University of Chicago; UNAM Mexico City; the University of Hawaii; and numerous other colleges, universities, and institutions around the world.
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Darby C. Stapp, Ph.D., RPA  
Journal of Northwest Anthropology  
P.O. Box 1721  
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telephone (509) 554-0441  
e-mail JONA@northwestanthropology.com  
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