

Lesson: Walking as a Data Collection Process

Thread: Being Awake, Aware, and Alive

Henry David Thoreau, *Walking*: “We should go forth on the shortest walk, perchance, in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return; prepared to send back our embalmed hearts only, as relics to our desolate kingdoms. If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again; if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man; then you are ready for a walk.”

Aim: Students will engage in the basic practice of collective qualitative research by utilizing naturalistic observation, documenting observations in a field journal, and then use inductive content analysis to document any relevant themes which may emerge.

Materials: Students will need a pen/pencil and a notebook/paper/tablet to record observations and to produce the final report.

Task: Utilizing the practice of flaneur, students will be tasked with walking for a minimum of 20 minutes either on school campus, near the safety of their own neighborhood, or any other public space/park/mall which offers a reasonable expectation of safety and is free from threat. During the walk, students should take copious field notes as to their observations which are thick with description and observation. The field notes should primarily reflect observations in the moment and not necessarily include analysis/evaluation, although this may occur as the student makes an effort to capture his/her own thoughts in the moment as well.

Students may consider for example:

- The number of people/animals/fauna in the surrounding area, if any (or the lack of such evidence)
- The time of day, date, location name
- Is there a parking lot? Are there several cars? Do the make/model/year of the cars suggest a particular demographic?
- What is happening in the space? Are people walking, talking, shopping? Are animals eating, hiding, scavenging?
- Is the space pedestrian-friendly, intended to be used by many people, private and secluded, usual in some aspect?
- How would you characterize the weather?

The nature of what students record is dependent upon several factors: the location the student selects (or the teacher assigns), the time of day/day of the week the task is completed, weather conditions, etc.

The field notes should capture immediate student observations. This may present an initial challenge as students are not to remain stationary and must document their observations and then continue walking through the space. Students will likely take frequent pauses to stop and write, but students should actively be walking through the space as per flaneur expectations.

Additionally, in the effort to adhere to flaneur principles and the spirit of naturalistic observation, students should make an effort to remain inconspicuous. Students should be mindful of the mandate to see all but not be seen. While this again presents a set of challenges, students should nevertheless make a concerted effort to adhere to this practice.

At the end of the prescribed 20 minutes, students may sit and use an additional 10 minutes (as necessary) to complete/correct their observations. Is the writing legible? Are all of the entries complete? Does the student need to include additional detail which was neglected in the moment?

It is my recommendation, that students then leave the field notes untouched/unmarked for 12-24 hours.

The next part of the assignment will ask students to engage in a simple practice of inductive content analysis. Using their personal field notes, students should devise a coding scheme that highlights particular themes or categories which may emerge:

- References to children vs mature adults
- Talking occurred when people were sitting, but not walking
- Visitors seemed to park near the left side of the building, but not the right
- Everyone wearing headphones was wearing sports/exercise outerwear
- All of the observed males were wearing shorts

The themes may take time to develop. This is the work involved in inductive content analysis. At this point however, students should not alter their original field notes. Students are left to their own best judgement if an observation is a pattern/important theme, but will need to justify this is the final product of the assignment.

Color coding is often a useful device to track emerging themes. Students should also be reminded that one observation may fall into more than one theme. For example, an observation of two children eating an ice cream cone may fit a category of eating as well as a social activity. There is no minimum number of themes which should be created. Indeed, given the limited time for the observation (and the challenge inherent in the choice of the location), students may find that one or two themes seem to be relevant.

The final product should be an analysis of the student's findings.

- What did the student find?
- What theme(s) emerged and what does this suggest about the space observed?
- Can the student speculate as to what might be different on another day/time of year, etc.
- How would the student characterize the experience? Was it awkward? Was there a violation of social norms? Any emotional difficulties?
- Were there any ethical considerations?
- What are some limitations to this approach? In what way(s) can flaneur be useful and in what way(s) is the approach limiting or problematic?

Students may format the paper in which every way best covers the requirements or the teacher may elect a specific format. Ultimately however, the sections should prompt the student to consider: what did you do, how did you do it, and what does it mean?

Assessment: The teacher should collect the original field notes as well as any coding keys and notes that the student may have produced from the analysis portion of the task. In addition, the final report will need to be evaluated for completeness, analysis, and reflective engagement.

Students should then prepare a brief presentation to share with the class about the findings/themes. During the presentation, the student audience should also indicate if they have visited the space being discussed. Did they also recall the same observations last time they were there? Do the student's themes seem reasonable given the observations and what the audience knows about the space?

This class discussion is an important task of qualitative research: triangulation and confirmability. The teacher may want to note if others in the class agree or can corroborate the student's version of events or the identified theme (especially if this is a space that the teacher has not visited). It may be likely that some students have a different memory of the same space or have had different experiences in the same space. The teacher should be encouraged to explore why this might be and to what extent each student's subjective phenomenological experience may inform observations and/or data analysis.

Further extension: Have students respond to the following quote. Does walking lead us into the Wild? Would we each take away a similar experience of the shared walk? Where/how can we access the primitive forests trees in our community?

Henry David Thoreau, *Walking*: "Life consists with Wildness. The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him. One who pressed forward incessantly and never rested from his labors, who grew fast and made infinite demands on life, would always find himself in a new country or wilderness, and surrounded by the raw material of life. He would be climbing over the prostrate stems of primitive forest trees."

Lesson: Quiet Desperation and Loci of Control

Thread: Being Awake, Aware, and Alive

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*: “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them, for this comes after work. But it is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things.”

Aim: Students will consider the extent to which they have free will over events in their lives and what degree of autonomy they are able to express. In order, to explore the concepts of internal and external loci of control, student’s will consider Thoreau’s proposition that most people live lives of quiet desperation.

Materials: pen/pencil and paper (or tablet/laptop)

Task: Given 10 minutes, students should write down as many obligations they have over the course of a month as they can recall, i.e.:

- Writing project for English
- Psychology reading homework
- Job on Mon and Thurs
- Soccer practice 3 times a week
- Emptying the dishwasher
- Volunteering every other Saturday afternoon
- Church once a week
- Walking the dog everyday

Students should do their best to exhaust a list of personal, social, occupational, spiritual, familial obligations. Because this task may seem daunting, the teacher may suggest dividing the list into prescribed categories: school, home, sports, self-care, etc.

Students should then be given 10 minutes to share a few items from their lists with a partner/small group. The teacher should encourage the students to observe what types of obligations are shared between partners.

Students should have a preliminary understanding of the difference between having an internal locus of control and an external locus of control.

Given approximately 5 minutes, students should review their list of obligations and mark whether the item reflects primarily something that we have little control over and is therefore outside of our ability to influence (external locus of control) or whether the item provides the student with a degree of autonomy and the ability to influence the outcome.

Bifurcating the tasks may present a challenge, which is in part, the point of the exercise. For example, a student may indicate that she has to walk her dog everyday. Does she have to though? What happens if she doesn’t walk the dog? Are there consequences that are unfavorable? So

perhaps the student doesn't HAVE to walk the dog, but rather, is trying to avoid cleaning up a mess. When the student walks the dog, does she have the ability to choose the route taken? The duration of the walk? When they stroll or run, or stop?

A student may feel he has to complete an English project. But, does he really HAVE to? Couldn't he take a failing grade on the assignment? What consequences might result from this? If the student completes the project, is there flexibility on how the project is completed/formatted? Does he have some degree of choice when he works on it or what it looks like?

Students should share with the class how they resolved these conflicts and how they reasoned the details of the task. It is likely that students will see the complexity of layers involved with the loci of control model.

Assessment: As a final reflection/ticket out the door, students should use a 3 X 5 index card/piece of paper and consider again Thoreau's claim about living a life of quiet desperation.

Is this a fair observation to make on behalf of others?

Is it possible that what an outsider may perceive as mundane or inane actually brings real joy and meaning to the person?

Are these things people are doing under an obligation to do so? A responsibility to home, school, worship, self-care?

Is Thoreau really just prodding us to be reflective about how we occupy our time? If we HAVE to walk the dog, isn't there a way that we can do so that brings authentic joy?

As an alternative, students may instead respond/challenge to the following quotes:

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*: "If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings."

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*: "If the day and the night are such that you greet them with joy, and life emits a fragrance like flowers and sweet-scented herbs, is more elastic, more starry, more immortal- that is your success. All nature is your congratulation, and you have cause momentarily to bless yourself. The greatest gains and values are farthest from being appreciated. We easily come to doubt if they exist. We soon forget them. They are the highest reality. Perhaps the facts most astounding and most real are never communicated by man to man. The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning or evening. It is a little star-dust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched."