Ethnography of a discourse community

Much of your research in this class (and others, I know) has been primarily source based, where you utilize the literature surrounding a topic - like journal articles, published study data, film, web sites, etc. - to make an argument about a topic. You may have wondered as you explored researchers' published findings: *who actually gets to do this original field research?* Well, you, actually.

The task:
In this assignment, you will be conducting an ethnography of a discourse community. Ethnography is essentially a study of a group of people and is a methodology and genre used typically in the social sciences and business, and regularly in anthropology. In doing ethnographic research, you observe a group, take notes, and report on your findings. For this ethnography, you will be observing and analyzing a discourse community of professionals in the field in which you'd like to work and focusing on the writing practices of that group. The focus of this research should not be solely on social dynamics or oral discourse, but rather on **how written texts work within the group.**

The discourse community you observe should be related to your field, meaning it could be:
- A group associated with a particular job or profession that produces some sort of written product: groups such as teachers, contractors, journalists, public relations people, an advertising agency, or the executive board at the local bank.
- A group related to your field of study--graduate students in a lab, professors, people working in the industry, etc.
- It could also be a group that has a stake in an issue in your field, such as a club or organization that produces written texts, like a non-profit with a weekly newsletter, a club that has weekly meetings and produces info on their website.
- Or a group that regularly attends a particular type of event related to your field. For example you could attend a conference in you field of interest and then also look at the written products - handouts, abstracts, powerpoints, etc. - of the discourse community.

Getting started:
- Be sure to collect written texts and other "artifacts" from the group for further analysis.
- If you are not a member of the group, contact a group representative to arrange a visit. Explain your purpose - this research assignment. Reassure the group that anything which is confidential you will either write about using pseudonyms or not

reveal. You may want to put your agreement in writing to the appropriate member(s) of the group.
- If it is not possible to observe or have face-to-face meetings with the group, arrange for several interviews with group members by phone, email, or online chat.
- Be careful to separate your actual observations from information you assume or your opinions and reactions to what you observe. To help you facilitate this type of "objectivity," use a double-entry notebook (which we will discuss in class).
- Some observers interact more with the group they are observing than others. If you plan on having some interaction, be sure you still have time to write and take notes.
- Give people some time to get accustomed to you before starting your note taking. Individuals who know they are being watched will behave differently than those who are in their natural environment without observers. But they tend to forget their observers after a while.
- Revisit your notes and organize as soon as possible after your observations.
- Be sure to pay special attention to the speech and literacy practices and language use of the group members you observe.
- Look for patterns in language, behavior, writing practices. Also, consider outliers - people who don't fit the pattern or norm.

What to observe:
When you are observing, it is impossible to focus on everything. For the purposes of this assignment, you should **focus your observations on the discourse community's writing practices.** You may also note what gets communicated through other channels - oral? Visual?
- For what purpose(s) are texts produced?
- How important is writing to the group as a whole?
- What genres are used in the discourse community?
- How are texts produced within the discourse community?
- Who produces texts? Do all community members produce, or just a select few?
- What guidelines does the community have for what counts as "good writing" in the community, i.e. what are the norms for genres?
- How are individual genres related to each other in the discourse community?
- How do the genres and purposes for the discourse community relate?
- What types of specialized vocabulary or "jargon" do they use?
- How do this group's writing practices fit into what we have conceptualized as a discourse community? How is oral discourse used to compliment written discourse? (or vice versa)

Assignment requirements:
Your paper of 1400-1600 words will present your findings as a research report or researched argument.

Some guidelines for a successful essay:
- You should organize your essay thematically, not chronologically. Do not give a report of what you did while researching - instead, group your data and focus on recurring themes of interest in your data that give answers to your research questions.
- You should also utilize some of the data you have collected directly in the essay - direct quotations or observations for example - to serve as exemplars of your themes.
- Regardless of format or organization, each essay should have a primary focus on the writing practices, written texts and language of the group in question.
- The brunt of your data will come from your field research, but you are also welcome to support or amplify your field research with primary or secondary sources.
- Use the citation guidelines (MLA, APA or Chicago)appropriate to your field. Find this in your Everyday Writer handbook.

Timeline:
- You should start planning and executing your primary research **ASAP** as you'll need to have your data to work with in class **Wed 10/29** for my M/W/F classes (**Mon 10/27** for my Monday nighters)
- 1st complete draft **HARD COPY due in class Monday 11/3**
- Revised draft due to me via Google doc (in your Drive, use the pink "create" button, then "doc" and compose your paper in Google's word processor. Then, use the top right "share" button, type my email: seedling89@gmail.com, and choose "can edit") before your scheduled class **Monday 11/10**