Teaching Showcase: Feature Articles
Undergrads Research and Publish Through the <u>Ethnography of the University</u> Initiative

by Claudia Petty

Thanks to the Ethnography of the University Initiative at the University of Illinois, a number of undergraduates and first year graduate students enrolled in Professor Nancy Abelmann's introductory anthropology courses explore the history and workings of the University to the point that they become experts on their particular research topics. Although being considered an expert in any field of study is atypical for undergraduate students, Nancy Abelmann, an associate professor with joint appointments in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures and Women's Studies, believes that "students know a lot about the University and know they have a lot of knowledge about the University." She suggests that students' knowledge of the University emerges out of their repetitive experiences dealing with a wide variety of institutional divisions, units, departments, and organizations situated within the greater institutional environment. According to Prof. Abelmann, the 50th time a student has gone to financial aid, they know a lot about the financial aid process. The 50th time a student has gotten a ticket because they can't park around the University, they have thought about town relations.

More From Professor Abelmann:

"There is so much existing information on the University that you need to build on that, and we have worked really closely with the library, the student life and cultures archive, which is a great repository and we created our own gateway. So I guess the way it has changed for me is imagining what technology can do for the project, what an archive can do, who an archive can help, and how it can enhance the inquiry process."

"Having a smart classroom: One of the things that is the most inspiring is that when you have these inquiry documents that are shared and that students own them and that they can put them up and they can show people the ownership and the authority that comes with it; that is so inspiring, but if you aren't in a smart

Being a member of the Ethnography of the University (EOTU) project, Prof. Abelmann has spent a significant amount of time asking herself what it means to do ethnographic research *of* the University as opposed to research *at* the University. She suggests that because she has been thinking about what it means to study the University ethnographically, she can guide her students more effectively in the inquiry process. Prof. Abelmann also suggests that by focusing on an interrogation of the University, students are able to utilize their knowledge about the University to identify a problem and then choose a research method that will allow them to "actualize their questions into a project." Through this inquiry-based approach, Prof. Abelmann suggests that she is able to effectively facilitate student understanding in a variety of areas, including anthropological research and especially ethnographic inquiry. Through these inquiry-based teaching strategies, Prof. Abelmann remains focused on assisting students in developing an understanding of "the constant process between some corner of the social world that they are interested in and the questions of what are the larger structures, discourses, ideologies, in which that corner of the social world is nested."

Prof. Abelmann believes that in the "best of all possible worlds… students are simultaneous users and producers." To facilitate this process, Prof. Abelmann and the colleges involved with the EOTU project have developed a web "repository of student generated data on the University." This repository was designed to house student-created documents, including documentation of the research *process* itself, that act as templates of persistent learning. This repository also helps to capture the realities of the research process by allowing students to repetitively return to their original documents and the documents of others. In this way, the repository acts as an environment that encourages recursive learning rather than the development of "final papers." Prof. Abelmann suggests that by utilizing this repository, "the learning documents of previous students become gateways" for future students who will ask more complex

classroom you as a teacher are never going to experience that."

"I have always been involved in inquiry learning."

"I have had undergraduate students, as a way of summarizing what they have learned, propose research projects. Propose summer research projects. Not necessarily do them, but just the idea that the best way to introduce people into the inquiry process is actually to imagine themselves as inquirers."

"Students say wow, I can't believe I can do this and call this school. It was so liberating."

"I found research painful and I have always believed that you should demystify the process. I try, when I teach books to undergraduates, instead of just treating them as a finished product, I try to unfurl them so that you can see the authorial hand of someone. There was data, there were ideas, there were interests, there were passions, and how did the person go from that data, interest, passion, biases, concerns, to the conclusions about whatever part of the world he or she is writing about. So I teach, I think the way I take apart, there is a book and I try to enter the book imagining the authorial process. That is how I try to unfurl the book for undergraduates. So they can interrogate it and criticize it…"

questions knowing that they are building on the work of those before them. This idea of building on the work of others is in line with Prof. Abelmann's notion that students should not "reinvent the wheel" every time they begin a research project since "it is not what the real research world is about." According to Prof. Abelmann, research involves the process of reading what other people have done and refining it further. Prof. Abelmann believes that "students should not start the inquiry process from scratch but rather should embed information on existing knowledge." According to Prof. Abelmann, opposed to the inquiry model with its public documentation of the research process is the traditional educational model centered on thousands of students examining the same questions and problems with "no particular institutional questions." "That" says Prof. Abelmann, "is our enemy."

As a way of fighting the enemy, student process documents are deposited into the online repository where they can be continuously examined by authors, student peers, public professionals, and teacher advisors with an eye toward refinement and expansion. In this way, students are able to recognize that they have taken an idea to a particular point and that further questions could and should be asked by others in the future. Through this process of refinement "an idea gets better." Prof. Abelmann proposes that when students "begin to use other students' inquiry documents… they then begin to think about production differently because they understand that they are leaving something real… something that someone else will pick up and run with." Prof. Abelmann believes that by helping students develop a sense of ownership of their work and by helping them to recognize that they are authorities and authors, they become more adept at validating their own knowledge. This development of an intellectual student identity, Prof. Abelmann believes, becomes the nexus for generating better student work.

As for educators, Prof. Abelmann suggests that there is "a kind of substantive payback, which is not only that it (the process of depositing self-authored, inquiry-oriented, process documents into the repository) produces better work," but that it has the potential "to make students citizens who interrogate the University in a more critical way." This process might even produce a different kind of student, one that "might go on to interrogate the institutions in their lives more critically." Prof. Abelmann advises, "if you want to produce a citizenry that interrogates the world in productive, creative, and active ways, I think you better start with inquiry learning."

Prof. Abelmann is a teacher who engages her students in the educational process in multiple and varied ways. Perhaps she focuses on inquiry learning because she believes "it has the potential to snag" student interests, or maybe it is because she is uncomfortable with lectures and the notion of memorization. Whatever the reason, Prof. Abelmann relies heavily on inquiry learning and has opted never to use a textbook in one of her courses and has only given one final exam in 15 years. She, instead, creates a non-traditional teaching/learning environment where students engage in inquiry-based projects, projects that facilitate learning while simultaneously producing more engaged and eager producers and consumers.

Examples of Student Research Projects

"The Transition from High School to College: The Change in Literacy Practices for Incoming Freshmen" by Anthony Curtis

Anthony Curtis wrote in his field notes, "North Dakota is less liberal than Florida, so'Zack's' access to literature fit a certain mold established by his community, while 'Slater's' community embraced all types of literature. He was able to read Spanish material in high school, and read literature about the GLBT lifestyle."
http://www.inquiry.uiuc.edu/bin/update_unit.cgi?command=select&xmlfile=u12813.xml

"Behind the Ratio" by Nicole Ortegón

Nicole Ortegón asked in the "explore" section, "Do students differentiate and/or feel differently towards lecture versus discussion section teaching assistants? Does spatial proximity between students and faculty/TAs in the classroom setting affect how students interpret such interaction? How do students, as well as faculty members, 'experience' the ratio?"
http://www.inquiry.uiuc.edu/bin/update_unit.cgi?command=select&xmlfile=u12836.xml

"Transfer Students and the University: Narratives of One Another" by Anne Maloney

Anne Maloney wrote, "I think I am going to focus on the reasons WHY students transfer to the University of Illinois, what their EXPERIENCES are as a transfer student, and lastly, what the University's narrative is about WHO transfer students are."
http://www.inquiry.uiuc.edu/bin/update_unit.cgi?command=select&xmlfile=u12810.xml