University of Toronto, Department of Anthropology

ANT 473 Ethnographic Practicum: The University, Fall Term 2016

Time: Wednesdays 9.30 -12
(9.30 means prompt - class starts then - please arrive by 9.20 to be ready on time)

Location: Ethnography lab
Instructor: Prof. Tania Li, tania.li@utoronto.ca
Office: Anthropology Department 424
Office Hours: Thursdays 10-12 or by appointment

We are a "work society" as we organize a huge part of our time, identity, social network, and mode of living as well as livelihoods around our current work and/or preparing for a future of work. But what is work, and what kinds of work go on in the university? This is the topic we will investigate collectively in the months ahead. Through observations, archives, interviews, photos and other methods, we will explore this topic empirically in a range of venues across campus. We will use our weekly meetings for brainstorming, sharing insights, coming up with provisional analysis, and allocating tasks for individuals or sub-groups to work on in the week ahead.

The purpose of the course is to learn how to conduct an independent ethnographic inquiry, analyse data, and write it up as a contribution to knowledge. The skills you learn will be useful in any field of work you enter in future, as you will become more aware of the social and cultural milieu in which you are living and capable of examining it and reflecting upon it in a way that goes far beyond the casual and everyday.

Results from our project will be featured on the Ethnography Lab website. See samples from the Ethnographic Practicum on the University (2015) and on Kensington Market.
https://ethnographylab.ca/category/ethnography-of-the-university/  [note - hover to get the drop menu]

The course is loosely based on the Ethnography of the University project at the University of Illinois http://www.eui.illinois.edu/. See the website https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/755 for a rich archive of past student projects. See http://www.eui.illinois.edu/resources/methods/ for readings and methods. You will see on the EUI site that they have been pursuing various projects over the years, and this year we will contribute a new one, with our concentrated focus on power. I also draw on the teaching methods of Michael Burowoy http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/syllabus/272E.pdf

Requirements

The course requires your creativity, enthusiasm, cooperation, initiative, intelligence, social skills, listening skills, curiosity, organizational skills, observation, dedication, good will, tolerance, flexibility, active participation, responsibility, maturity, integrity, ethical conduct, some reading and lots of DOING: doing your field research for at least four hours per week, writing field notes, and preparing for class presentations and discussions. The course is intended for upper level students with significant background in anthropology, hence the 400 level code, so if you don't fit that category and still want to take the course, be prepared to do extra work.

The spirit of the class is collaborative, so we will devise some of the ways we want to organize it as we go along. Assignments and tasks are designed to maximize collaboration, insight, and learning. Half the final grade will be based on your contributions to the collective effort. This has two components a) the process of knowledge production, and b) the work of conveying that knowledge to others, through shared weekly blog
posts, a final published report, and the joint development of materials for the website. The website will be pulled together in the last two weeks of class.

The other 50% will be based on ten short written assignments submitted to me via blackboard. Each assignment is 500 words, on a topic of your choice. It must be uploaded each week by Tuesday 5pm. Examples: summarize a reading and draw out what it contributes to our project; summarize field observations and discuss their implications; discuss ethical dilemmas and how you will resolve them; reflect on the strengths and limitations of our methods and how to improve them; others tba. I will grade the short assignments and return comments via blackboard. This will enable me to keep track of how you are doing individually. It is also the way you will learn: you read, you write; you observe, you analyse; you discuss with your peers, you commit your reflections to paper... Some of these individual writings may be shared with peers as blog posts, or integrated into the website or integrated into your individual final report.

Reading for the class is front-loaded, as we need to start off with a strong and imaginative conceptualization of what is work, and how we can investigate it. After that, most of your time each week will spent doing research, and writing about it. Active field work will start on around Sept 28, as soon as we have our ethics permit.

1 Sept 14 Introduction: what is work, and what kinds of work go on in the university?
Some of the work that goes on inside the university is common to other spheres - eg the work of janitors, security guards, secretaries. Some other kinds of work are quite mysterious - is intellectual work really work at all? Is reading a book work? Does it make it non-work if we enjoy the work we do, and invest our emotions and identities in it? How do we draw the boundary between work and leisure? How is the world of work in the university changing?

Discussion in class:
1 What is work in the university: brainstorming exercise - think through the different kinds of work and how they are distributed across domains of university life.
2 Initial brainstorming on sites and methods: how and where can we investigate work in the university? How can we use observation, participation, documents, interviews, and other sources?

Homework:
Read on work:

2 Sept 21 Into Work: clarifying concepts

Discussion in class:
1 Summarise and discuss the readings on work
2 What is distinctive about the university as a site of work?
3 Discussion of implications. Deciding on initial field sites and tasks.

Homework:
More reading on work:

Immaterial Labor, Maurizio Lazzarato, http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcimmateriallabour3.htm

"Toronto strikes back against neoliberal education," (written by some UofT anthropology grad students):
https://roarmag.org/essays/graduate-instructor-strike-toronto/

"Food service workers to hunger strike during convocation," (article about U of T food service workers' strike):
http://thevarsity.ca/2016/06/06/food-service-workers-to-hunger-strike-during-convocation/

"Death of an adjunct," (an editorial about the US adjunct who died in poverty in 2013):

Spend one hour in a potential field site "unobstrusively" ie just be there and observe. Make notes. Come to class ready to discuss.

3 Sept 28 How can we study work?

Discussion in class:
1 Review/discuss readings.
2 Present findings from initial field work.
3 Where/what next? Refining research targets.
4 Research ethics - dos and don'ts

Homework:
Negotiate entry to field and get started. Take notes

Burowoy: "Participant observers confront two hurdles: getting in and getting out. Entering the field site can be the most aggravating, unnerving, humiliating part of the field research. It often raises all sorts of ethical dilemmas. Yet to the extent it is emotionally draining and thwart with resistance (internal and external) so it is all the more significant. Your attempts to "enter" can provoke a crisis situation not only for yourself but for those you want to study and thereby reveal much of what is normally hidden or taken for granted. Barriers to entry display the "values," assumptions," and above all "interests" of those you are about to study -- the theories they hold about the external world from where you come. ... The more "blunders" you make, the more embarrassed (humiliated) you will be but the more you will learn. In short, "getting in" provides the most important materials you will collect, although their meaning will become apparent only later in the field research. It is imperative you record all your experiences around entry -- all the resistance and all the anxiety. this is not the pre-play before the real act."

Burowoy: "There is no point in spending time in the field without writing up your field notes, and immediately after leaving the field. Loss of detail, mistakes, distorted reconstructions increase exponentially as time elapses from the original experience. ...In the beginning field notes should offer as much detail as possible. One should write down everything one can remember. (Making notes during the field to jolt the memory afterwards is very useful. If it's awkward to be seen writing then the lavatory is a good secret (re)treat.) The first set of field notes should describe the setting, the characters you interact with or observe
and what they are up to. It is important you do this in the beginning when everything is novel since soon you will take so much for granted that it will be difficult to offer a vivid description. At all times specific, concrete, detailed descriptions are crucial. What appears irrelevant in the beginning may turn out to be central in the end. The meaning of each field sortie is only unravelled in subsequent sorties. As the study progresses so questions emerge that will push you toward collecting certain types of data or perhaps suggest a change of field site. Field research is a process of discovery and reconstruction."

4 Oct 5 Documents, observations, field notes.

Discussion in class:
1 Discuss fieldnotes - what they are, how to do them, what can/can't be shared.
2 Report back from field research and decide what next

Homework: research of an "observational" kind. Write up fieldnotes to share with the group. Be ready to discuss.

5 Oct 12 Discussion: Fieldwork practices and dilemmas

Homework: research, notes, writing. Be ready to discuss. Are you getting stuck? If so, your class mates are your best source of new ideas, approaches, angles to get unstuck and move forward ....

6 Oct 19 Moving towards analysis.

What puzzles are coming up in our research? What theory could help us make sense of what we're finding?

From Burowoy: "In the seminar you move from participant to academic. It is here that participant observers are forced to respond to the interests and concerns of other sociologists, that is, forced to develop the "scientific" dimension of their analysis. A second advantage of working intensively in a seminar lies in the diversity of problems that are encountered. In effect we will be learning about the technique of participant observation not just through our own personal experiences but through the experiences of others too."

Useful sources on fieldwork dilemmas and how to position yourself in relation to your research field:

7 Oct 26 From now on, we'll be in a routine of research, writing, discussion, and planning. Any new reading will relate directly to analytical puzzles we need to solve.

8 Nov 2
9 Nov 9
10 Nov 16

The last two weeks Nov 23 and Nov 30 will be for writing your final paper and joint work on the website.

Final research papers are due on Dec 16