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EDF 626

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3/6/2016

Field Notes Style Reflection

 Field notes. What can I say? My first attempt at keeping field notes was (spoiler alert: author will soon employ hyperbole) a disaster. As I observed a special education classroom at Waverly High School, I attempted to write down everything about the room that I could. I focused first on the location, appearance and make-up of the room. After a page or two of boring text about tan and orange walls and tile floors, I began to focus a little more on the events of the classroom. I tried to record every piece of dialog between students and students and students and staff. Oh god, was it rough. I left the room and went to compile my field notes and felt that I had no clue about what happened. What resulted was a couple of poorly written description with no educational value.

 My second attempt was a little more fruitful. I was encouraged to attempt to observe the classroom without taking notes and then retell the story after. I sat, watched and listened as the class discussed monarchies and reading strategies. I left the room and immediately began compiling my field notes. The resulting product was a more enjoyable read than my first, but I was just recalling the events. I wasn’t expanding my understanding of multi-handicap classrooms. I was simply chronicling a day in Waverly’s MH classroom.

 As EDF 625 continued and I learned more about qualitative research I began to understand that I need to observe with a goal in mind. My first two attempts were blind observations. I didn’t have a guiding question or problem to focus on. I was so worried about missing something that I missed the most important aspect of an MH classroom; social interaction. The social dynamic in an MH classroom is unlike any other high school classroom. Students and staff share a common goal and work together to achieve it. I am upset that I missed an opportunity to share the beauty of social learning in a classroom like that.

 With that new understanding, I entered EDF 626. I began to find myself approaching field notes in a way that is beneficial to my research. I focus on the things I want to understand and take shorthand notes as reminders. Now my notes don’t look the same on a day to day basis. Some days I write several pages of notes and thoughts. On others, I use simple bullet points and abbreviated statements. I still compile my notes after an observation but now my writing is more driven by my understanding of a situation than an obligation to retell it.

 I keep my notes in a leather journal. This may not be the most efficient way to do it but I love the smell and the feel of the paper. . My rugged journal allows me to take notes without the distractions of wifi and text messages and it helps to keep me focused on what is important in my research, the experiences of those participating. In all of my notes I use the same informal tone that I use in most of my writing. There isn’t any point in faking professional voice for notes’ sake. Taking notes in the same tone that I write in eliminates some of the difficulty in compiling my field notes. I also have found that I focus so much more on individual experiences in my notes. I write about what classmates share about their feelings, struggles and triumphs in qualitative research. This can be therapeutic or it can elicit further investigation into why classmates responded this way. I have found that, when taking field notes, I participate less in class occasionally. Not in a way that is detrimental to my learning but in a way that allows others to speak more freely and completely. I feel like sometimes I dominate discussions and rob the group of an important viewpoint from one of my less social classmates.

 I still struggle at times. I can become so involved in class that I don’t take notes at all or I can become so involved in notes that I look like a crazy jerk who is only contributing to a project and not a classroom environment. I feel like when I go into that mode I appear more as an outsider than I should. This could be harmful in a more fragile research relationship. I need to be disciplined enough to maintain the balance between the fire I have while in class and the icy way I dive into note taking some times. I want my research relationships to be as strong as steel and as with steel too much fire or ice can make relationships brittle and shatter, but the perfect balance of fire and ice will provide relationships that are tempered and will stand the tests of time (Cheesy, I know… but it aint easy being cheesy!).