



From observation to reflection

LOCUS PR5: Sustaining a student programme beyond the LOCUS project

A. Stimulating students to do observation

Observation is a key skill that helps students engage with the world around them in meaningful and reflective ways. It allows them to notice details, understand social interactions, and analyze environments in ways they might not have considered before. Below are some tips to stimulate and support students in their task of fieldwork observation.

(1) Starting with curiosity

The observation lies in curiosity

At the beginning, stimulate discussion and foster curiosity: Why to Observe? You might discuss with students that observation serves as a valuable tool for uncovering the gap between perceptions, attitudes, and actual behaviors. While interviews often reveal people's opinions, beliefs, or aspirations about a situation, observation focuses on how things truly happen in practice / in everyday life / in certain environments.

Also, encouraging students to ask questions "What is happening here?" or "Why is this the case?" fosters curiosity and drive students to seek meaning in what they see and experience.

(2) Teaching the Art of Noticing

Observation is more than just looking; it is about *noticing*. Students could be encouraged to pay attention to small details that might seem unimportant at first but could reveal deeper insights. For example, how people use a public space or how they interact in a group can tell stories about cultural norms, personal habits, or even societal challenges.

(3) Applying Observation Skills

To guide students to become more skilled observer, they could apply specific skills, for example:

Focus on unusual - to look behaviours or patterns that stand out of usual / norm

Start Broad, then Go more Deep - Students might begin by observing general environment, and then focus on specific action, detail, object etc

Pay attention to your own multiple senses - Listening, smelling and even sensing the atmosphere of the space / environment, can build a richer understanding of environment.



(4) Documenting Observations Creatively

Encouraging students to use visual tools like photos or short videos can make the observation process more engaging, interesting and insightful for students. These visual methods allow them to capture small but important details that might otherwise be forgotten. For example, a photograph of a busy street corner or a photo of a seating arrangement in a park can preserve a moment in time, offering material for further reflection and analysis.

(5) Embracing the Unpredictable and Openness

Observation may offer unexpected discoveries. Students may start with a clear plan, but real-life environments can lead to surprising and meaningful insights. Embracing this unpredictability helps students to foster openness in their learning.

B. Facilitating Reflection Amongst Students

Reflection is a key part of learning, especially when students step out of the classroom and into real-life fieldwork. It's during these hands-on experiences that they face challenges, make discoveries, and gain a deeper understanding of their field. Helping students reflect on these moments isn't just about teaching—it's about guiding them to think deeply, make sense of their feelings, and see how their experiences connect to what they've learned in class.

Below are simple and practical ways teachers can encourage students to reflect during fieldwork. Clear tasks, group discussions, and tools like photos or short videos help students process their experiences, share their thoughts, and learn more deeply. By providing support and a safe space for exploration, teachers can turn fieldwork into a meaningful and rewarding experience for every student.

(1) Creating opportunities for structured reflection

Structured tasks are key to helping students actively engage with their experiences and observations during fieldwork. For instance, in the research seminar course, observation assignments encouraged students to notice their surroundings, document their observations and findings, and reflect on their role as observers. These tasks motivated students to move beyond merely being present, prompting them to actively connect with and deeply explore the environments they study.

To enhance the depth of reflection, guiding questions are helpful. For instance, asking, "*What surprised you during your observations, and why?*" helps students identify moments that challenge their assumptions and uncover deeper insights. Similarly, the question, "*How do these observations relate to broader social or cultural issues?*" encourages students to contextualize their findings within larger frameworks, fostering a more comprehensive understanding. Lastly, the question, "*What would you do differently if you were to repeat this observation or task?*" promotes self-awareness and continual improvement, helping students refine their approach to future fieldwork.

Additionally, students were encouraged to write reflection notes immediately after fieldwork. This task / practice fosters a habit of documenting initial impressions while their thoughts are still fresh, capturing the details of their experiences that might otherwise be lost over longer time. By integrating



these structured tasks into the learning process, students develop a more disciplined and reflective approach to their fieldwork, which supports both their academic and personal growth.

(2) Supporting the collaborative reflection in group settings

Collaborative reflection in group settings can be a good way in fostering collective learning. Group discussions during and after fieldwork provide students a space to share their experiences, such as overcoming challenges during surveys or refining observational techniques. This exchange of ideas not only allows students to learn from each other but also fosters peer support and problem-solving. Also, hearing diverse perspectives in groups helps students to address their own uncertainties and build self-confidence.

In addition, reflecting on team dynamics, such as task delegation, communication, and group organization, helps students develop essential teamwork skills. Understanding the importance of collective responsibility and supporting one another may reduce anxieties associated with unfamiliar research tasks. For example, at Tallinn University, many students discussed that working together and sharing responsibilities made challenging assignments easier to handle and more satisfying. Thus, through these interactions, collaborative reflection creates a supportive environment where students can grow both academically and personally by learning from their peers' insights and experiences.

(3) Supporting emotional and ethical reflection

Supporting emotional and ethical reflection is an essential part of the learning process during fieldwork. These reflections, in a way, goes beyond academic insights, however offering students an opportunity to process their feelings and navigate ethical questions. For instance, encouraging students to openly discuss challenging experiences, such as uncomfortable or unexpected interactions during fieldwork, allows them to process their emotions and learn from these situations. So, this practice not only fosters personal growth but also helps students build resilience and confidence in handling similar challenges in the future practice situations.

Additionally, reflecting on ethical dilemmas, such as respecting residents' privacy during observations, promotes a deeper understanding of professional responsibility. These discussions help students develop a strong ethical foundation, ensuring that they approach social work with integrity and respect for the individuals and communities they engage with.

(4) Using visual documentation for reflection

Using visual tools for reflection can significantly enhance the depth of students' reflective practices. Incorporating visual aids, such as photos and/or short videos, alongside written notes allows students to capture details they might otherwise overlook or forget during fieldwork. These visual tools may serve as valuable references, helping students recall specific observations and analyze or even reassess their experiences more thoroughly. Thus, when combined with written reflections, visual documentation (photos, videos) may stimulate students to think and analyze their data from multiple perspectives.

(5) Reflexivity: Looking inward



Reflexivity may take reflection even a step further by supporting /pushing students to critically examine their own assumptions, biases, and the ways their backgrounds influence their research. Questions such as, "How did my own presumptions influence my interpretations?" or "What biases may have influenced my observations?" encourage deeper understanding and self-awareness. This process allows students to evaluate their roles as researchers and consider how their personal experiences and perspectives might shape the way they interpret and engage with the data.

Reflexivity is especially vital when navigating what has been described as the "world of strangers," where students are exposed to unfamiliar settings and diverse social environments. In such contexts, maintaining openness and adaptability is key. By engaging in reflexivity, students not only enhance the quality and depth of their research but also develop a greater capacity for empathy and understanding, which are essential skills for ethical and reflective social work practice.

(6) Supportive supervision, feedback

The core of meaningful reflection lies in the support of educators, who can offer safe and welcoming space for learning. Through their care and dedication, educators turn reflective practices into journeys of insight and growth. Their role is not just to teach but to inspire, fostering an environment where students feel seen, heard, and empowered to thrive. This, regular feedback and supervision during fieldwork provide more than just learning opportunities; they offer moments of reassurance, turning uncertainties into valuable opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Conclusion

Facilitating reflection among students during fieldwork is a journey that intertwines academic learning, and personal and professional growth. As a teacher, what small changes could you make in your teaching to encourage deeper reflection in your students? How might you use their reflections to improve not only their learning experience but also the course design and even your own teaching practices? Could creating more opportunities for students to share their stories and experiences inspire even greater learning and growth? By making reflection a natural part of fieldwork, you help students see the world with fresh eyes and guide them to grow into caring, ethical, and thoughtful professionals.