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2018

Neighborhood Research Essay

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Assignment Abstract

The following “Neighborhood Research Paper” assignment has been used in LIF 101 for Social Science and Humanities students, but could be adapted to give students the chance to practice disciplinary thinking in a variety of fields. The main objectives of the assignment are

- 1) to give students the chance to engage with guided secondary and primary source research by using key resources on campus, especially the LaGuardia and Wagner Archives and the Library;
- 2) to help students practice fundamental writing and critical thinking skills (summarizing, paraphrasing, quoting, synthesis, analysis);
- 3) to give students a chance to conduct preliminary ethnographic research (i.e. field notes, interviews) in their own neighborhoods in order to de-familiarize environments that may have become familiar to them;
- 4) to introduce students to disciplinary mindsets through focused inquiries that align with the role they adopt for the assignment.

This is a high-stakes assignment made up of lower stakes tasks that unfold over five weeks. It is worth 25% of the total course grade.

LIF 101, First Year Seminar: Liberal Arts, Social Science & Humanities
Neighborhood Research Project

This paper has been created to give you a chance to practice thinking like a professional in a field within the social sciences or the humanities. Over the next month, you will work alongside a small groups of classmates who live in your neighborhood or an adjacent NYC neighborhood in order to research this area. **Your research will happen in the following ways**

- in-person observation or “fieldwork” (looking, listening, note-taking)
- reading and learning about the area through secondary sources (books, academic articles, recent films produced about the area, etc.)
- archival research (finding first-hand journalistic accounts, reading diaries of residents, looking through old photos, maps, original documentary film footage, etc.)
- writing and reflecting to pull your thoughts together and to refine your research questions as you go.

Research isn’t only about what resources you find; it’s about the reasons why you decide they are meaningful based on your disciplinary approach. Each person in your group will choose a research role to play. There are three research roles that you can choose from for this project:

HISTORIANS place the past in context. They might begin their research by asking questions like...

Who inhabited this neighborhood 15 years ago? 50 years ago? 100 years ago? Who held local government positions? Were there any community organizing groups that had a presence in the neighborhood? What issues were most important to the local residents? What languages were dominant in the area and have they changed over time? Why? Were there any particular jobs or industries that were once common in the area, and have they changed over time? Why might that have happened? Are there any unique cultural monuments or historical landmarks in the area?

SOCIOLOGISTS are curious about the demographics of a neighborhood. They might begin their research by asking questions like...

Who lives in this area now? What races, ethnicities, or socioeconomic classes are represented? Investigating class means asking about a variety of indicators: what’s the average level of education in the area? What are people’s careers and salaries? What are the crime and incarceration rates in the neighborhood? Are there any important subcultures that have emerged in this area—groups that unite because of shared values and activities? How might you study them?

URBAN PLANNERS are interested in the use of public and private space in a neighborhood. They might begin their research by asking questions like...

How has the layout of the neighborhood changed over time? Are there any local laws that say what people can or cannot build in the area? What is transportation like here? Is there any green space and how is it used? Are there cultural centers that bring people outside of the area to the neighborhood? Are there opportunities in other areas that have been drawing people out of the neighborhood?

Notice that there is overlap between all three roles. Even though you are writing your own 4-page paper, you should share your resources with your group members, especially if you find sources that may be relevant to their research roles.

PROJECT TIMELINE

Week 1

- Introduction to the project/creation of teams. Discuss the different ways of knowing and explore questions at various stations around the room: sociology, history, urban planning (agree on a specialist role within your team by the end of class)
- **Submit your two-paragraph research proposal.** In the first paragraph, describe the research role you plan to play in your group and what you expect to learn about your specific neighborhood by adopting this research role. In the second paragraph, describe two possible questions you will pursue based on your research role and how you will begin to collect research on these questions.
- *For extra credit or co-curricular credit: **A training session about the program Social Explorer**—a resource that provides quick and easy access to current and historical demographic data, helps users to create custom maps and reports, and helps researchers explore and understand patterns behind numeric data—will be held on _____ **in the Library, Room E101-B.**

Week 2

- Sharing of research questions and agendas in groups. MLA Citation style. Lesson: “What Annotated Bibliographies are for and How to Create Them.”
- **Visit to the LaGuardia and Wagner Archives.**
- Practice composing annotations with sources (from archive). Follow up library session (room TBD).

Week 3

- **A complete and properly formatted annotated bibliography with at least THREE reliable sources is due.** We will workshop these in class.
- During the break/over the weekend you will complete a first draft of your 4-5 page neighborhood research paper, responding to a research question and combining the various forms of research you’ve done (see the model papers distributed in class).

Week 4

- **The first draft of neighborhood report due today.** Bring 3 copies to class for peer review session.

Week 5

- **Revised neighborhood research paper and revised annotated bibliography due (submitted with draft and rubric, please!).** In-class group presentations on neighborhood research.

This is a major project that has three key parts. Together, these parts are worth 25% of your grade for the course:

- First draft of research paper, with an in-class peer review with your group members (5 points)
- A final paper with annotated bibliography (15 points. Each student will receive an individual grade.)
- Group oral presentation (5 points. All group members will receive the same grade for the presentation.)

After you have walked around your neighborhood, taken some first-hand notes, visited the LaGuardia and Wagner archives, and done research online and in the library, you will be ready to turn your research into a written narrative about your neighborhood from the perspective of a sociologist, historian, or urban planner. Your paper should read as its own stand-alone 4-page narrative, but it should also complement the other papers written by your group members. In other words, there should be very little repetitive information across the 4-page reports in your group; each should use different pieces of research to tell different, yet related stories.

Sophistication and Precision of Research Process (4)

- Paper draws from a mix of secondary and primary sources.
- Sources are carefully introduced in the body of the essay, summarizing and paraphrasing when possible and quoting when necessary.
- Original sources (rather than another writer's description of a source) have been used whenever possible.

Evidence of Analysis (4)

- Any quotations have been introduced with enough context that outside readers can understand their relevance to the research topic.
- Paper demonstrates writer's ability to draw conclusions from various types of sources.
- Writer combines first-hand experience exploring the neighborhood with what appears in the research, noting any correlations and/or contradictions.

Format (3)

- any charts, graphs, tables, figures, or images are clearly labeled and referenced in body of paper
- paper has a title
- header on every page (in MS Word, go to "insert" then "header." Type last name next to page number)
- MLA in-text citations are correctly formatted and match sources listed in MLA-style annotated bibliography
- paper is four pages, typed (12 point font) and doubled spaced [*this does not include the annotated bibliography*]

Quality of writing (4)

- Structure: essay displays understanding of basic essay format (introduction, multiple body paragraphs that are connected with transitions, conclusion)
- Sense of purpose: from start to finish, paper maintains a clear focus on a trend or feature (or a few related trends/features) of the neighborhood.
- Clarity of sentences: grammatical errors are minimal and do not interfere with a reader's ability to understand the writer's ideas.

LIF 101 Neighborhood Research Project

Group Presentation Rubric

Neighborhood:

Names of group members:

Key issues related to group members' research roles as historians, sociologists, and/or urban planners are discussed in the presentation.

Comments:

Information about the neighborhood has been thoughtfully presented in a narrative fashion, with an effort to help the audience retain that information.

Comments:

Aids (video, audio, PowerPoint, handouts, etc.) are used effectively to supplement the speakers' presentations.

Comments:

The group has made an effort to create connections and transitions between each person's section of the research project.

Comments:

Each speaker speaks clearly, with emphasis and enthusiasm, makes eye contact, and projects his/her voice to the class. Every group member has participated in the presentation.

Comments:

After listening carefully to the presentation and writing brief comments on the opposite page, please circle one of the following:

5: Group presentations meets all five requirements

4: Group presentation meets four of five requirements

3: Group presentation meets three of five requirements

2: Group presentation meets two of five requirements

Please give your rubric to Professor _____ after the presentation. These rubrics will be given to the group members. Specific praise and constructive criticism are both appreciated.

*For outside audiences, you may want to print this letter on LaGuardia letterhead.

[date]

To Whom It May Concern,

_____ is enrolled in my First Year Seminar (LIF 101) at LaGuardia Community College this semester. He/she has been assigned to do primary source research on their local neighborhood, which includes collecting interviews or oral histories from members of the community.

Any interviews collected are strictly for the purposes of this class research project. No part of the interviews will be circulated beyond the class or published in any form.

If you have any concerns or questions, please do not hesitate to contact me by email at _____@lagcc.cuny.edu or by phone at _____.

Thank you for your willingness to help make this neighborhood research project a meaningful learning experience for my students and for me as an educator.

Sincerely,