Summary of FwI Project
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Ethnography of the McMaster Community and University

1) How has the project fostered collaboration and inter-disciplinarity?

In January 2013 I learned that my FwI Proposal, entitled “Ethnography of the McMaster Community and University” was to be funded. The proposal sought funding for an innovative and community-oriented undergraduate course situated at the third-year-level. It also sought funding to think about how imagine the ethnography of the university, a project of some urgency given the current changes in higher education.

Within this context, I designed a new course at the undergraduate level on ethnographic methodologies (ANTHROP 3P03). Together, 33 undergraduate students and I looked at the ways in which ethnographic and cultural anthropology methodologies could help to describe the university in a community-related sense. We began with looking at some of the relevant literature, and moved on to the discussion and implementation of methodologies relevant to anthropology. In this sense, however, students did not conduct interviews but were asked to reflect on their own experiences in and with an institution that many of them experience as alienating and strange. The result was a better understanding of how education works, and why it works in the way it works. The course was important to convey to them a practical and hands-on sense of how ethnography works – that is, insights that are usually only provided in a theoretical way.

Within this context, I also traveled to Zagreb to meet up with young faculty members from the Central University in Budapest to discuss the ways in which university education is structured in Eastern Europe, and what kinds of changes they envision. As a result, a follow-up project has been initiated that will look at the ways in which creativity and university come together. This project also looks at the limitations of creativity within the context of the university (please also see point 5).

2) How has the project exposed students to new or emerging research?

The project exposed undergraduate to emerging ways of conducting ethnographic research, as well as to new emerging ethnographic and social sciences literature in relation to the university system. In this way, it also taught them how to situate their own insights in relation to theory.

The proposal outlined that I would hire one McMaster anthropology graduate student. In this capacity, I hired Ana-Maria Dragomir as a graduate research assistant to assist in the creation of a syllabus design, and to conduct silent participant observation in ANTHROP 3P03 that I taught in FT 2013. Dragomir’s participation helped her in understanding how to conduct ethnographic research, as well as a new body of ethnographic methodologies and literature.
3) How has the project offered students an experience beyond traditional borders?

Usually, ethnographic methods are taught in theoretical ways, precisely because it is so hard to devise projects for them to conduct on campus and beyond. The project offered undergraduate students a study experience that went beyond the confines of traditional anthropology teachings, and it also assisted the graduate student in understanding how to conduct an ethnographic project – again, something that is usually only talked about but never practiced.

4) How has the project challenged the confines of existing programming and advanced new paradigms of research or education?

The project has provided hands-on experience in cultural anthropology and ethnographic research methods to both undergraduate and graduate students. This kind of hands-on experience is usually hard to achieve in cultural anthropology courses, and it has also provided me with some insights of how the undergraduate program would need to be restructured to some extent to continue to provide students with this experience.

5) How will the outcomes of the project be sustained or expanded?

The course and project was so successful, that I have applied for ARB funding to look at the ways in which creativity, university life, and education are connected. Should this funding be successful, I will submit a larger SSHRC Insight Grant (2015) and Partnership (2016) application, each of which will look at the ways in which pedagogic art can help to open up the classroom, as well a normative understandings of the university itself.