VISITING THE WORLD: PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

General Guide

In this experience, students visit a location outside of the classroom and observe complex concepts and dynamics in action. This experience requires only minimal direct stakeholder engagement by the students, so it is a good introduction for students new to these skills. It requires little coordination with community partners beyond arranging the single experience, which can be done by students when time and ability allow.

“Participant observation refers to the process of learning through exposure to or involvement in day-to-day or routine activities ... it gives the researcher an intuitive and intellectual grasp of the way things are organized and prioritized, how people relate to one another, and the ways in which social and physical boundaries are defined.” - Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompt (1999)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Level: 200; can accommodate group size: 2-20</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyment</td>
<td>Students visit a real-world setting without much responsibility. Collaboratively designing the experience with community partners can make sure that students aren’t - or don’t perceive themselves to be - invading other peoples’ spaces.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Students develop “insider perspective” and see applied course concepts.</td>
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</table>
| Adjustments             | Instructors need to coach students in techniques and ethics of participant observation, and arrange the experience with an organization, event, or community if it is not a public space. Somewhat extractive, so instructors may need to arrange other ways to engage or “give back” to an
| **Benefits** | Can help students learn concepts (e.g. democratic decision making around sustainability issues) or methods of qualitative data collection. |

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

- Compare and contrast the information offered by a place or event to what you’ve learned in class. [SYSTEMS THINKING]
- Compare and contrast the value systems of the participants observed with the value system of your own. [VALUES THINKING]
- Plan, prepare and conduct oneself professionally during the participant observation itself. [INTERPERSONAL COMPETENCIES]

**ACTIVITIES**

This experience gives students the opportunity to observe stakeholders interacting in a real-world setting. Students attend an event that addresses sustainability problems or solutions within the region, city, or community. During the event, the students’ role is to observe, read the agenda or other material provided, listen to the discussion, and take notes on the stakeholders, dynamics, discussion, solutions, etc. The instructor’s role is to help students identify (or do so themselves) a relevant public event, make any necessary arrangements for students to attend, and coach students in effective, ethical observation techniques.

The experience draws on qualitative research methods of participant observation. Social scientists use this method to research people and processes in “native” settings through their five senses (Baker, 2006). Participant observation can also be used in teaching to help students get an inside view of an event, location, community, or organization and help students learn how to use qualitative data collection methods.

Participant observation could be combined with similar real-world learning experiences like field trips and volunteer events, which also take students into the real world to observe. What sets participant observation apart from these other real-world learning experiences is the perspective students assume as a scientist and the structured collection of data in the form of written observations, pictures, etc. A rule of thumb is 4 pages of typed notes per hour of event. Notes should include a record of what students observed through their five senses and the conversations they engaged in; reflections should include course concepts encountered, perceptions, feelings, and questions the experience sparked. These observations may help students grapple with the nature of sustainability problems and solutions. They may also help students notice and evaluate the validity of their own perceptions and assumptions.

Please note that instructors may need to verify with their university’s IRB office that the participant observation they design does not require IRB certification. The key to this real-world learning experience is that it is used for educational purposes, not research, and observations will not be distributed outside of the classroom.
Before
- Select an event for students to observe. Make sure that the event addresses a sustainability topic and is open to the public.
- Use judgment to decide how many students would be appropriate to send to each meeting and if it would be appropriate to contact the meeting organizers by phone or email to let them know that your students will be attending. Consider size of meeting, contentiousness of issue, and possible unintended consequences of students’ presence.
- Develop assignment prompt and rubric. Specify transportation options.
- Give assignment 2 weeks before meeting. Explain the purpose of the meeting.
- Secure signed field trip release forms from students 1 week before meeting.
- Review with students the guidelines for observing and taking notes. Coach students in rigorous and ethical participant observation.

During
- Students observe and take notes independently.

After
- Discuss observations and reflections with students after the experience. Help them consider what the observation clarified for them and what questions it left them with.
- Make reflection assignments due within a week of the event as memories may fade quickly.
- If appropriate, send thank-you email to meeting organizers.

Assignments and Assessment
The assignments below that can maximize learning outcomes of the Participant Observation experience and produce outputs that can be assessed to determine achievement of the learning objectives.

- Read Arnstein (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation and define extractive and collaborative research using citations of both articles.
- Record observations in written notes immediately after the experience. Output: 4 pages of notes and reflection per hour.
- Draw pictures of key observations with captions. Output: 1 page of pictures.
- Write reflections with both prompted and open-ended sections to process experience. Output: 1-4 page reflection.
- Discussion experience in class as soon as possible after the experience with peers and instructors. Output: participation.

Use a Likert-scale to determine if students achieved all, most, some, little, or none of the learning objective. Develop a rubric with examples of answers that demonstrate students have achieved all (5), most (4), some (3), little (2), or none (1) of the objective.
TAKE THIS EXPERIENCE TO THE NEXT LEVEL!
Engage the world: Students use participant observation as a method for collecting data as part of a larger group or individual project. Contact IRB office to make sure you don’t need certification.

BIBLIOGRAPHY & RESOURCES


PARTICIPATORY OBSERVATION EXAMPLE: ATTEND A PUBLIC MEETING: PHOENIX SUPERFUND

SUMMARY
Students attend a public meeting of the Community Informational Meeting for the Motorola, Inc. 52nd Street Superfund Site in Phoenix, Arizona and write a reflection on water sustainability problems and community engagement. Students develop critical observation skills, evaluate tools and procedures for successful meetings, evaluate the effectiveness of meetings as a community engagement strategy for this sustainability issue, and reflect on participant observation as a method for sustainability research.

“public meetings serve an important democratic function by providing citizens with the opportunity to convey information to officials, influence public opinion, attract media attention, set future agendas, delay decisions, and communicate with other citizens. - Adams (2004)

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:
- Compare and contrast the information offered by a place or event to what you’ve learned in class. [SYSTEMS THINKING]
- Compare and contrast the value systems of the participants observed with the value system of your own. [VALUES THINKING]
- Plan, prepare and conduct oneself professionally during the participant observation itself. [INTERPERSONAL COMPETENCIES]
- Evaluate public meetings as strategy for collaboration on sustainability solution options. [STRATEGIC THINKING]
- Describe examples of differing concepts of justice, equity, social-ecological integrity, and ethics that were apparent in the meeting. [VALUES THINKING]
- Identify the tools, strategies, and skills used to keep the meeting orderly, civil, timely, relevant, collaborative, and useful and analyze how successful they were. Make suggestions for improving the meeting process. [INTERPERSONAL COMPETENCIES]

ACTIVITIES
This experience gave students the opportunity to observe facilitators and participants - including EPA representatives, corporate lawyers, and community members - of the Community Involvement Group (CIG) meeting. Students recorded their observation and wrote a reflection in which they considered a series of questions including: who the participants and facilitators were; who attended and why as well as who did not; how people’s values, beliefs, and goals differed and how this impacted the meeting; how people interacted, how they communicated and discussed science; what the goals of the meeting were and what was actually achieved; and what the role and impact of
public meetings was in superfund cleanup and water sustainability problem-solving in the Phoenix Metro area. Instructors set the date for the experience, contacted the CIG coordinator to let them know the number of students who would attend, from which class, and how attending the meeting would fit into the course curriculum. In the class after the meeting, the instructor led a debriefing discussion with students to share their observations and reflections.

**Guidelines to give students for observing:**

- Use all 5 senses and write down notes if it is possible to do so unobtrusively during the meeting. Try to keep your observations and critical reflections (field notes) separate from your personal thoughts, feelings, and reflections (personal notes). Field notes provide scientific data (Baker, 2006) and personal notes provide material for personal reflection and self-directed learning. Type and flesh out notes immediately after meeting. Rule of thumb is: 1-2 pages of typed notes per hour of event.
- Observer’s presence can unintentionally influence meeting or participant relationships. For example, where observers sit and who they interact with during the meeting might appear to support one particular stakeholder or stakeholder group which could anger others (Hartley, 2009). Try to find out as much about the event, issue, people as possible to help you avoid such issues. It is okay to speak with participants, ask questions, and share information and opinions if asked but not okay to influence core processes of the meeting (Baker, 2006).
- Make sure it is clear to community partners who ask that this is an educational activity; students are not conducting research for which they would need IRB certification.

**Before**

- Found date of quarterly Community Informational Group (CIG) Meeting. Contacted CIG coordinator to let her know how many students will attend.
- Developed assignment prompt and rubric.
- Introduced activity and assignments to students two weeks before the meeting. Let students know what public transportation was available to meeting location.
- Secured signed field trip release forms from students one week before the meeting.
- Reviewed with students the guidelines for respectful observation and thorough notes.

**During**

- Students observed and took notes independently.

**After**

- Facilitated debriefing and discussion in class after the experience.
- Sent a thank-you email to CIG coordinator.
- Facilitated discussion and / or distributed concluding assignment.
ASSIGNMENTS AND ASSESSMENT
The assignments below can maximize learning outcomes of the participant observation experience and produce outputs that can be assessed to determine achievement of the learning objectives.

- **Read** Arnstein (1969). *Ladder of Citizen Participation*

- **Compile** field notes during the meeting. Use to complete subsequent activities. Output: field notes (1-2 pages of typed notes per hour of event).

- **Write** reflection of meeting. Output: 2-3 page reflection.
  - Describe facilitators and participants, how they interact, who is there and who is not.
  - Describe examples of differing concepts of justice, equity, social-ecological integrity, and ethics that were apparent in the meeting.
  - Identify the tools, strategies, and skills used to keep the meeting orderly, civil, timely, relevant, collaborative, and productive.
  - Analyze the success of these tools, strategies, and skills.
  - Analyze public meetings as tools for collaboration
  - Define collaborate and extractive research, citing Arnstein and Student Tutorial. Consider which describes participant observation.

- **Discuss** meeting process in groups of 3-5. Output: 5 written recommendations.
  - Make recommendations for improving the meeting process through modifying existing tools, strategies, and skills or adding new ones. Explain what they are, why they are important, and who would need to do what in order to implement them.

Use a Likert-scale to determine if students achieved all, most, some, little, or none of the learning objective. Develop a rubric with examples of answers that demonstrate students have achieved all (5), most (4), some (3), little (2), or none (1) of the objective.

TAKE THIS EXPERIENCE TO THE NEXT LEVEL!
- **Visit the world:** Students set up time to interview facilitators and participants to dig deeper into their perspectives and values, or other issues.
- **Simulate the world:** Have students compile suggestions for improving meeting process into a meeting guide. Assign students roles of participants and hold a mock redo meeting.

BIBLIOGRAPHY & RESOURCES
- EPA Overview of Motorola, Inc. 52nd Street Superfund Site

