

## The Virtual Workplace Ethnography: Positioning Student Writers as Knowledge Makers



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**Abstract:** The Virtual Workplace Ethnography is a first-year composition assignment that positions students as knowledge makers by requiring them to apply a theoretical lens (“Working Knowledge”) to a video representation of a workplace. The lens provides multiple terms for analysis of workplace behaviors in context, providing a scaffolding for apprentice ethnographers that allows them to take an informed stance on their research. The “virtual” aspect addresses the complex ethical issues raised by ethnography by substituting a fictitious setting for an actual site. The essay explores the challenges of the assignment, offering examples of student texts and student metacommentaries on the work. The essay argues that this assignment addresses longstanding concerns about the challenges of making meaningful writing assignments in FYC and concludes by exploring the potential of the assignment in distance education.

### Meaningful Writing Assignments

For quite some time now, compositionists have been concerned about the kinds of writing asked of students in first-year writing courses. Twenty years ago, Joseph Petraglia used James Britton’s work to criticize “pseudo-transactional writing,” writing “solely intended to meet teacher expectations rather than engage in a transference of information for the purposes of informing the uninformed or demonstrating mastery over context” (21). This criticism was echoed a decade later as the challenges of making meaningful writing assignments in FYC were articulated by other compositionists who asked how student writers can succeed in situations where their instructor is the expert while they lack the expertise required to produce effective writing (see Nist 108, Sommers and Saltz 133, Soliday 11). For example, Sommers and Saltz have argued that writing effectively requires writers to exercise authority, therefore counseling faculty to treat first-year writers as “apprentice scholars, giving them real intellectual tasks” (140).

Many instructors have turned to ethnography as an alternative to secondary library research because it allows students to apprentice as actual researchers (Liebman 17). According to Seth Kahn, two major reasons for assigning ethnography are that it produces a “heightened sense of expertise” (New Teacher’s Guide) and “a strengthened sense of knowledge making” for students (qtd in Hawkins). Students can learn more from the direct experience of ethnography than from the indirect forms of knowledge acquisition, such as reading or listening to a lecture, given that they must reason inductively. Instead of examining previously generated knowledge for comment, they are instead creating new knowledge through data collection (Kahn 178). In short, ethnographic assignments place students in the role of knowledge makers because they shift the students’ activities from *receiving* knowledge to *discovering* it (Pryor 397, Arias 92-93). Mary Soliday, citing Anne Herrington, notes that “perhaps... it is easier to compose oneself in a discipline’ when one is asked to behave like an expert from the beginning, doing the things that experts habitually do and trying on their ... roles (69). In sum, ethnography provides an opportunity for students to “invent the university,” in Bartholomae’s famous phrase, by engaging in the very same activity that academic scholars—such as their instructors—engage in: making new knowledge rather than repackaging previous knowledge for presentation to their instructors.

In this article, I present what I call a “virtual ethnography,” a form of introduction to the ethnographic work of observation. In this assignment, students observe a “virtual workplace.” The assignment differs from an actual ethnography in two important ways:

- the “virtual ethnography” is completed by observing and analyzing a depiction of a workplace in a contemporary film or television program such as the small town government office depicted in *Parks and Recreation*.
- the “virtual ethnography” requires students to view the workplace through a theoretical lens called “working knowledge.” Roger I. Simon, Don Dippo, and Arleen Schenke explain that “‘working knowledge’ is a useful concept for the study of how people in different workplaces define what is important to know in order to be competent workers and do competent work” (190). (See [Appendix](#) for the assignment sheet.)

I plan to explain why these changes make the “virtual ethnography” a valuable pedagogical approach for FYC courses.

## Challenges to Assigning Ethnographies

There are, of course, challenges presented in taking any ethnographic approach, the primary one being the students’ unfamiliarity with the observational tasks required. Wendy Bishop warns that “Ethnography is a research approach that is best learned by doing, but before doing, the doer needs to get a handle on what should be done” (1). One way instructors can respond to this cautionary note is to provide student ethnographers with a theoretical lens through which to examine the cultural site they have chosen. Malley and Hawkins are explicit about the value of using a lens, explaining, “We often frame our fieldnote assignments through a series of different possible ‘lenses,’ asking students to examine the design and feel of a site, the power structure or power play evident there, the ways in which they see themselves in and through the site...” Providing a lens helps the students—as it does the professional ethnographer—to get “a handle on what should be done,” in Bishop’s phrase.

My students write an ethnography of a workplace by using as a lens Simon, Dippo, and Schenke’s concept that all work is situated: “Knowing what to do and how to do it often requires much more than technical training. Knowing your job often means understanding how work requirements are shaped by particular organizations in which these requirements take place” (27). To clarify what they have in mind, they offer the concept of “working knowledge,” which “includes more than just the notion of a technical ability to perform certain tasks” of the sort that require special training or education (e.g. typing invoices, using micrometers, washing hair, developing photographs, etc.). “Each and every task in a workplace,” they continue, “is embedded in a particular set of social relations within which people define the facts, skills, procedures, values, and beliefs relevant to particular jobs in their own organizations” (28). The key sentence in their explanation is this one: “...there is no work in the abstract; there is only work in context” (28). Simon et al offer examples of several forms that working knowledge might take, and my assignment requires that students use the concept of “working knowledge” and the specific forms identified by the theorists as their “lens” through which to observe their chosen workplaces. I contend that the concept of working knowledge can be applied just as readily to a video or film depiction of a workplace as it can to an actual workplace, provided that that depiction has been offered in detail.

The use of what some call “lens and artifact” assignments (see Sullivan) or “material artifact analysis” or MAA (see McKenzie) is fairly common at this time. McKenzie explains that the MAA moves from choosing an artifact and developing a “thick description” of it through analyzing the collected data and arriving at a thesis (75). The University of Connecticut Freshman English Program also offers a description of a lens-and-artifact assignment on its website: “If we think of a basic research assignment as, one, a ‘thing’ to be looked at and as, two, a ‘way of looking,’ we might better define these roles as an *artifact* to be described, cited, analyzed, and interpreted, and a *lens* for providing the ‘meaning’ of this artifact...” As applied to an ethnographic assignment, I employ “artifact” as a metaphor representing the cultural activities of the group being observed. The “lens” is the theoretical framework used by the observer as a scaffolding to make observations and subsequent analyses. As one novice ethnographer explained, such a lens assisted her in presenting an “organized” presentation of her observations and analyses. This student concluded her essay by writing, “Considering whether or not a job is suitable and within a person’s limits is a very subjective process, but it can be much easier when organized. When observing the television show *Parks and Recreation*, I applied ‘working knowledge’ to the government workplace depicted to explain why this would not be a good place to work.”

When this student reaches her conclusion, she provides an illustration of Soliday’s assertion that “from a rhetorical perspective, no content is free floating but must be governed by someone’s angle of vision” (36). Rather than cautioning the students about the risks of subjectivity, the virtual ethnography assignment requires them to reach a conclusion, to take a “stance,” using Mary Soliday’s term. “Stance” she explains, “requires writers to do more than present information; they perceive and judge it in some way (36). Soliday also describes the challenge faced by student writers when asked to write the traditional “college essay”: “it does not give students access to a typical

social language and the roles and focus that go along with the speech” (57). The virtual workplace ethnography insists that the writers adopt a stance and then provides them with the tools to do so in the form of the theoretical lens and its attendant language in the form of Simon et al.’s theory of working knowledge. The assignment I discuss in this article is subject to the concerns voiced by Soliday: that students will experience a conflict between their desire to present an “objective” report and their instructor’s understanding that the subjective cannot be eliminated (and that as readers we do not seek the elimination of the subjective in our reading). I contend that the requirements of the virtual workplace ethnography assignment offer a resolution to this apparent conflict because the students understand that they must take a stand if they are to be helpful to their designated readers: potential workers at the workplace in question.

Perhaps more significant than the question of the ethnographer’s stance is his or her need to conduct ethical research. Stinnett points out that “Ethical problems of how to speak for or present another’s experience persist... [in ethnographic research]” (130), and Arias notes that ethnographers should conduct their observations only with the consent of participants. He concludes, “If consent is not possible, writers change names to protect privacy” (96). I suspect that Arias’s final observation would not be assented to by many ethnographers who might insist that without consent, an ethnographer really cannot represent the participants at all. The ethical issues of studying human beings must be resolved suitably before any instructor can in good conscience assign an ethnographic project. However, these important ethical considerations are not germane to the “virtual workplace ethnography” because the students do not observe actual workplace participants but rather actors in a depiction of a workplace. Thanks to the experience of observation, analysis, and presentation of findings to readers with an interest in the findings, students thus perform apprentice work as “virtual ethnographers.” In their next assignment, they can tackle an actual ethnography when the issues of representing participants will have to be resolved ethically.

## The Virtual Workplace Ethnography

Let me offer a brief word in defense of the notion that this assignment is still an “ethnography,” rather than, say, a textual analysis of a dramatic performance (or an appraisal of an artifact that has taken the form of a dramatic performance). The theoretical lens provided to the students does not permit them to analyze the television program or film as an aesthetic artifact: they cannot analyze camera angles, *mise en scene*, the screenplay, the actors’ performances, symbolism, theme, or the nuances of character development, direction, or special effects. Instead, they must observe the performers as if they were indeed workers at a workplace. The questions they need to ask are not about the artistic quality of the production. What matters is the data the students can glean from their observation of “working knowledge.” They ask questions about the language of the workplace such as “How do these workers use language at the workplace? Do they develop slang or jargon particular to their work environment? Do they employ nicknames for one another? What topics do they discuss at work? What jokes do they make?” They examine the frame of reference in play at the workplace for making judgments about how to define “a good day at the office,” “a distasteful task to avoid,” “an unfair supervisor,” and “a good co-worker.” Their observations include searching for the five other forms of working knowledge identified in the assignment sheet (see [Appendix](#)).

I call the assignment a “virtual ethnography” not only because it occurs on a screen rather than a physical location but also because I acknowledge that it is not an actual ethnography, given that the student researchers cannot interact with those whom they are observing. But this assignment can serve as a precursor to a more traditional ethnography. The value of the assignment is that it offers students the opportunity to create new knowledge even when they choose to watch a favorite or familiar show because they have undoubtedly never viewed the program or film through the lens of working knowledge. This assignment, as is the case with any ethnography, requires direct, primary research generated by “field work” which, in this case, takes the form of close viewings of the video. The assignment also engages students in an area of their existing literacy: the world of video/film. For students with actual work experience, their own workplace literacy generally increases their comfort with the conceptual forms of “working knowledge” identified by Simon et al. While the representations that students select to write about may be fictitious, they represent existing discourse communities in the working world: hospitals, police stations, business offices, restaurants, and so forth. Most important is that the students practice applying a theoretical lens to data collection through this assignment. Admittedly, this is not a particularly complex ethnography, but as such it can serve as an introduction to ethnographic study. Two distinct advantages that it provides are that the use of video recordings through streaming video sites or YouTube not only facilitates close observation but also provides an accessible record of the workplace that can be revisited multiple times, and no travel is necessary as the workplace appears and reappears at students’ command on a viewing screen.

Of course, one drawback to the virtual ethnography is that the students cannot actually interact with the workers whom they are observing to learn more about their subjects’ experiences, a major disadvantage of the assignment.

However, this project requires students to incorporate a second perspective into their final paper so that they are compelled to deal with other existing viewpoints. Students generally look for a critic on sites like IMDB (The Internet Movie Date Base), Rotten Tomatoes, and Metacritic, but they also find commentary directly from sources such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *Rolling Stone*. They learn that this search is not a simple one because critics generally focus on the video as an artifact for aesthetic critique; any comments they may make about the workplace or the characters as workers are most likely tangential. Thus the students' written work differs from the TV and film critics' work not in degree but in kind because they are not writing critiques of the video but analyses of the workplace. For example, Virginia Watson's review of *CSI* notes that "Whether it's ageism, sexism, or weightism, *CSI* seems to show sensitivity to all groups" (3). Will Wade, in his review of the TV series *Spartacus*, describes the owner of the gladiator training school as "a master of manipulation," and James Parker, in *The Atlantic*, analyzes the workers at The Krusty Krab restaurant in the animated children's series *SpongeBob Square Pants*, noting that "Mr. Krabs cackles over his money, while Squidward, the tentacled sourpuss at the register, droops with ennui. But SpongeBob's professional life is rainbow-colored."

Some creative students have found other expert commentators: one interviewed a high school teacher about the high school work environment depicted on *Glee*, and another interviewed a police officer about the workplace on HBO's *The Wire*. One student who selected *House of Lies*, a show about a management consulting firm, found a magazine article entitled Six Management Consultants Assess the Accuracy of *House of Lies*. Such alternatives, of course, are not the same as interacting with the actual subjects of an ethnography, but they serve to introduce the students to the concept that they must consider others' interpretations of their field notes. With such an assignment under their belts, students can tackle the complexities of interacting with those whom they are observing as well as representing multiple voices and perspectives in a subsequent actual ethnography.

## Scaffolding the Virtual Ethnography

In order to prepare the students to produce a virtual ethnography, I take them through a number of preparatory activities that begin by introducing them to inductive research and analysis through a theoretical lens. I provide a handout that depicts the dietary logs kept by two imaginary students, both listing what the students have eaten for breakfast, lunch, snack, and dinner on a given day. After scrutinizing the data, the class considers the question, "What thoughts do you have about these two diets?" A lively discussion usually follows as the students discuss their generalizations and speculations (it is interesting to see the arguments about gender and age that enter the discussion) until I finally ask them, "Which diet is healthier?" There is always a consensus that Student A has consumed a healthier diet, one with less salt, sugar, and fat and more fresh fruit and vegetables. I make the point that our discussion has been inductive as the conclusions have clearly been based on the data collected.

I then distribute a copy of the USDA's famous food pyramid, with which my students are quite familiar. The students form into pairs, half of whom analyze Student A's diet while the other half analyze Student B's diet by determining how many servings of each food group on the pyramid their subject has consumed. When the class compares notes, there are discrepancies in how the students count servings, but when we have finished, the better diet is still determined to be Student A's. I point out, however, that what we have done this second time is to replace the "common sense" and personal experience of our first foray into inductive reasoning with a "theoretical lens," i.e. the USDA's food pyramid. Viewing the dietary logs through this lens provides a focus for their analyses, a language with which to discuss their findings, and grounds for their conclusions.

At this point, the class reads Simon, Dippro, and Schenke's "Working Knowledge" essay and discusses its concepts in the light of their own work experiences. I ask if any students have ever worked at more than one location in a retail or restaurant chain. "Is the workplace the same at the 7-11 Convenience Store here in town and the one in your home town?" I inquire, and the answer is, of course, "No" because the context of workers, location, and customers is different. I also ask the class to compile a list of questions they would want answered *by the workers* at a potential workplace, not *by the Human Resources manager*. They quickly grasp that the employees would answer the question "How do the employees feel about this workplace?" much differently than would the HR manager. The point here is that informal conversations with potential co-workers produces working knowledge.

Then we read several essays about work, including a personal memoir by a factory worker. Instead of examining the themes or writing style or the ideological implications of the memoir, we look for as many forms of working knowledge as possible, employing the working knowledge lens. This exercise makes the point that the writer's depiction of the workplace through its language, unwritten rules, accepted facts, and so forth provides an ethnographer with much data with which to analyze the working knowledge of the writer's specific factory job.



The next step in preparing the students is to focus on the core concept of working knowledge: that work only exists in particular locations. Students read Perri Klass' HERS column in the *New York Times*, a memoir in which Klass, a practicing physician, revisits her days as a medical student who struggled to understand a new workplace lexicon at a university hospital. Her memoir is filled with examples of medical jargon, a "code" that she eventually "cracked." But examples such as "NG" (nasogastric) are fully intelligible to many of my students thanks to their having watched television hospital shows. The point I want to make is that while the language she describes may be specialized, in a sense, when we apply the concept of Working Knowledge, we redefine that "code" as generic workplace language found at most hospital workplaces.

However, at another point in her memoir, Klass writes about one of the interns whose penchant for using obscure terminology led to his earning the nickname of "Mr. Eponym." She describes how his habit of using multinamed syndromes such as "Wolff-Parkinson-White" led his colleagues to mock his language habits by coining ridiculously named syndromes such as "Baskin-Robbins." At this point, the students can see manifestations of working knowledge in the form of the language of Klass's workplace. The nickname "Mr. Eponym" is exclusive not only to the hospital at which Klass worked but to the specific unit in that hospital. The joking response of Mr. Eponym's co-workers is another strong example of language as working knowledge because sarcastic humor, too, is unique to this specific workplace. The purpose of the lesson is to encourage the field observers to look for *specific* examples of working knowledge, not the *generic* ones common to most similar work sites. [1](#)

Finally, the class then shifts to watching a workplace as depicted in the pilot episode of *The Office*. The show is familiar to many students and depicts a very ordinary, common kind of workplace. Additionally, *The Office* DVD provides a running metacommentary by the "workers" through brief interviews with an invisible documentarian who is filming their workplace. I also share with the class the commentary made by the show's creators on the DVD. One of the workers, Pam the receptionist, is shown using white-out to erase a typing error, a fairly generic "workplace fact." However, as she uses the white-out, we hear her speaking to the documentary filmmakers, explaining that she had always dreamed of being an illustrator for children's books, not an office receptionist. The show's director comments that he purposely juxtaposed her words and her actions to highlight the negative impact of the workplace on her ambitions. The students recognize that the white-out is no longer a generic fact but has become a specific example of workplace materials worth citing in an ethnography. At the same time, thanks to having heard the director's observation, they learn the value of seeking an additional perspective on the workplace, as the assignment stipulates. The discussion concludes when I ask the class to decide whether they would like to work at Dunder Mifflin Paper Company, stipulating that they explain their decisions by referring to the working knowledge they have identified, not simply to their gut responses.

These kinds of scaffolding activities are designed to prepare the students for the actual "field work" required. They have practiced applying the theoretical lens to written texts and video texts; they have experienced, through class discussion, the challenges of interpretation as they decide which form of working knowledge describes each instance they have seen. I hope they have also come to see that ultimately identifying one example as a "workplace fact" and another as a "workplace rule" is an act of interpretation and that their explanation matters as much as their classification of the example. They practice taking a stance and experiencing the difference of opinion likely to arise in any group of twenty-five students (most of whom indicate that working at Dunder Mifflin with that group of co-workers seems distasteful, but then there are always a few students who will say that they are drawn to the silliness and lack of discipline exemplified at the office). They are ready to work on their own workplace ethnographies at this point and will bring their drafts to a peer review workshop and engage in multiple drafts, as they do with all of the course writing assignments.

## Student Ethnographies

The Working Knowledge theoretical lens works with any workplace, although some worksites have been perennially popular: hospital settings (*Grey's Anatomy*, *House M.D.*), police stations (*CSI*, *Law and Order*), office settings (*Ugly Betty*, *30 Rock*), and bars (*Coyote Ugly*, *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*). However, some students have ventured far afield, seeking atypical workplaces such as Captain Jack Sparrow's pirate ship, the prison-of-war camp of *Hogan's Heroes*, the fast food restaurant in *SpongeBob Square Pants*, the meth lab in *Breaking Bad*, the gladiator school in *Spartacus*. Reality series set in pawnshops, bakeries, gun shops, and bridal shops have also proven to be effective choices. So long as the workplace is depicted in some detail, the ethnographer is able to complete the assigned task.

The students' ethnographies offer subtle insights into the workplace by identifying specific forms of working knowledge as defined by Simon et al. For example, "frame of reference" is defined as the way that workers make judgments or determine reputations at work. One student explained that in the lawyer show *Suits*, the senior

partners' frame of reference for judging their law associates is "unfair." They "play favorites" and administer discipline that depends upon which of the associates they are dealing with. Another student observed that in *Entourage*, the famous actor whose "posse" forms the work force is represented by an ambitious theatrical agent for whom the frame of reference defining *success* rests entirely on the amount of money earned. The student offers as an example the agent's self-satisfaction when his client is offered a multi-million dollar contract for a film even though the agent has not even bothered to read the script to determine its quality, which apparently does not figure in his judgment.

Simon et al. define "'workplace materials' as the 'tools' and physical environment of the job," and student ethnographers learn to be careful not to focus on routine materials such as desks and cubicles in an office setting, instead identifying the materials that specify a particular workplace.<sup>[2]</sup> For instance, essays about *Office Space* describe a notorious broken printer that persistently flashes the error message "Printer Jam" as an important feature of that workplace environment. Likewise, in identifying "workplace skills," defined by Simon et al as "the abilities necessary to succeeding at work," the writers learn to avoid describing the expected skills necessary to hospital care providers, such as knowing how to take someone's pulse or administer a blood transfusion, instead identifying that those who work with the irascible Dr. House need to develop the skill of patience and must learn "how to work around Dr. House." Another student explains how hospital worker Nurse Jackie, who takes drugs at work but cannot afford to lose her job, must be "skilled" at being sneaky, witty, and quick to respond if anyone questions her suspicious behavior.

Often students' discussion of skills grows out of an understanding of "workplace facts," "the accepted realities of the job," as Simon et al. explain the term. One vital fact identified by a student analyzing the high school setting of *Glee* is that the cheerleading coach is the pre-eminent power figure at the school, rather than the principal, a fact that the rest of the teaching staff simply has to acknowledge in order to function effectively. Another ethnographer, examining the gun shop in the reality show *Sons of Guns*, points out that the antagonism between the head gunsmith and his apprentice, while generally kept under wraps, still creates a tension in the workplace that co-workers must accept as a given of their daily working lives. But skills may also be developed in response to "the rules of the workplace," which Simon et al explain generally refer to the "unspoken rules" that "govern behavior at work." At the restaurant *Shenanigans*, in the film *Waiting*, "there is only one unwritten rule and that is when Dan, the manager, isn't looking, anything goes," writes one ethnographer, who then offers examples of the kinds of misbehavior that characterize this unruly workplace. And several essays about *SpongeBob Square Pants*, evidently a childhood favorite of many of the students, elaborate on the Krusty Krab restaurant's key unwritten rule that Mr. Krabs, the owner, is driven by an excessive greed and frugality that determine many of the negative aspects of working there and the skills that the workers must develop to cope with the unpleasant atmosphere of working for Mr. Krabs.

One of the more diverse aspects of Simon et al.'s theory of working knowledge is "language [or] the way workers speak at the workplace" because it not only encompasses word choice and slang but also the use of nicknames, personal verbal tics, preferred topics of conversation, subjects for humor, and vocal tone common to the workplace, as the Perri Klass scaffolding activity had demonstrated. Thus, readers are informed of the "vulgar language" that permeates the gun shop in *Sons of Guns*, the sarcasm that marks Dr. House's interactions with his staff, SpongeBob's habitually cheery greeting, "Good morning, Squidward," to his co-worker, the incessant joking of one *NCIS* officer, the mysteriously never-defined "TPS" report in *Office Space* that rattles all of the office workers, the unpleasant nickname assigned to the lead doctor ("The Nazi") on *Grey's Anatomy*, and the arrogant know-it-all speech patterns of one of the subordinate officers on *Criminal Minds* that undermine his chief's authority.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of writing the virtual ethnography, however, is that it has a purpose: students are expected to reach conclusions based upon their analyses of the data they have collected. The virtual ethnography is not a site for a random series of analytical comments, however insightful they may be. It is a rhetorical situation with a purpose—a purpose that drives the students' decisions about which forms of working knowledge to include in the essay in order to make their argument convincing. In other words, they are not merely data-collectors, but they are also decision-makers. Most of the judgments they reach about the workplace tend to be couched in terms of an imagined potential worker. For example, SpongeBob's restaurant job has generally been viewed in a negative light, with one typical conclusion reading, "The Krusty Krab would be a horrible restaurant to work at for multiple reasons," reasons that are identified as shoddy ethics and unhappy co-workers as evidenced by their unpleasant language. Similarly negative, one student concludes his analysis of the gladiator school in *Spartacus* with its debased use of language, reprehensible job skills, and evil ethical standards by writing, "This job is one of the most demeaning and demoralizing jobs ever created ... and I would not recommend it for anyone who has a heart." Another student reviews her analysis and takes a definitive stance: "However, based on the facts and language of this workplace, I conclude that a person would not want to work in the FBI

Not all of the final judgments, however, are negative. Lindsay, for example, concludes on a positive note, having decided that the crime lab on *CSI* would be a rewarding place to work thanks to the workers’ “fun but focused language” and their strong sense of ethics. She writes, “By using the idea of working knowledge, employees can learn how to effectively evaluate the new work environment...” A more vigorous defense of a workplace occurs when Sharon actively counterargues with her readers’ anticipated response. She has been analyzing the unusual workplace on *Supernatural*, in which the Winchester brothers fight evil in a fantasy world by hunting down demons on the loose. She reminds readers that the Winchesters “have to have the right tools, skills, and a certain set of ethics that are specific to their job in order to be successful hunters.” Then she acknowledges that “Many people would look at this life and run away, knowing what the brothers have to give up and what they have to do. The Winchesters’ job isn’t one that everyone would want to have.” But she then asserts her own different evaluation: “I disagree though. I think the fact that they work so hard and are so dedicated to saving others while sacrificing their own lives is admirable and very rewarding. However it’s not a job for everyone. It takes hard work and dedication. It’s not for the faint of heart or those who aren’t ready to sacrifice their own lives for others.”

One of the most striking ethnographies focused on *Mad Men*, the long-running television series about advertising agencies in the 1960s. Roberta uses the theoretical lens as a tool for critiquing the workplace’s failure to recognize the dignity of working women, placing difference in the foreground of her analysis. She writes,

Based on my observations made from watching *Mad Men*, it is safe to say that not many women would want to work at Sterling Cooper advertising agency. Women nowadays are trying to be seen as equal in the work force, something that cannot be achieved at Sterling Cooper. However, the job may seem appealing to men based on the fact that they are at the top of the power ladder. They are able to mix in their sexual desires and humor with their everyday work, which some men may see as a bonus, although there are others who, along with the women, would be repulsed by the attitudes of the males towards the females in this television series. This sexism towards women displayed through the various forms of working knowledge is why I, for one, would never want to work under Don Draper at the Sterling Cooper advertising agency.

What happens in the most effective ethnographies, like Roberta’s, is that the writers use the theoretical lens to develop a clearly-articulated stance. Admittedly, the conclusions are often unsurprising and could well be the same opinions the writers might reach without using the working knowledge concept, but the point is that they *do* use the conceptual tools provided by Simon, Dippro, and Schenke, and in doing so invent themselves as knowledge-makers. (This is reminiscent of the dietary scaffolding activity in which “common sense” and the USDA Food Pyramid produced comparable results.) In Roberta’s conclusion we can see what this ethnographic assignment can do when it works as intended. Applying the theoretical lens we had studied to a “site” for her ethnography, she can take an authoritative stance, as advocated by Sommers and Saltz, in which she knows more about her subject than her readers and confidently uses that “depth of knowledge” to reach a firm and convincing conclusion.

## Problematizing the Virtual Ethnography

As with any assignment, however, some challenges arise in assigning the virtual ethnography, and discussing these issues can effectively reveal the complexities of the assignment. To begin with, choosing a topic for the ethnography is a stumbling block for some students. Is it better to select an unfamiliar program or a well-beloved one? In their portfolio letters, some students weighed in on this question. Ellen reported that her favorite paper was the workplace ethnography because “I felt this one expressed my thoughts and ideas more effectively because I was connected to the topic.” However, Karl chose his favorite television show and observed that his level of familiarity and interest in the topic made it the “fastest paper” he had written all term. He then ruefully acknowledged that his quickly composed draft earned his lowest grade of the course. His conclusion? He acknowledged that he had not paid enough attention to the theoretical lens and would have earned a higher grade by focusing on “the ‘seven features of working knowledge’” instead of summarizing the plot and describing his favorite characters.

A number of students struggled to balance their analyses and descriptions. Carolee was aware of the need for this balance and voiced her apprehension in her Writer’s Memo: “I’m concerned that I may have gotten a bit caught up in explaining the context of the show and maybe devoted too much attention to that rather than my actual analysis.” Monica also confessed that she tipped off-balance: “At one point during the essay when I was talking about the detectives’ skills and workplace facts, I gave a lot of information about the plot, which I realized wasn’t necessary to get across the point of the essay.” Alison reported that in her revision process she recognized that

she had too much data and not enough analysis, so she decided to narrow her focus from an entire TV series to a single episode and at the same time limit her discussion of working knowledge from three kinds to two. These students' recognition of what they have done is a sign of progress, I would argue, as it suggests they have learned to adjust their strategies in revising this ethnography, as Alison has already done, or prepared themselves to adjust again when called upon to write an actual ethnography.

Other students shifted into a textual analysis of the video as an artifact instead of remaining focused on studying it ethnographically as a workplace. For example, in her Writer's Memo, Natassia explained that "The thesis of my paper is that the Krusty Krab is not a realistic workplace," apparently not realizing that such a judgment has moved her away from analyzing the working knowledge of SpongeBob's workplace into appraising it as the setting for a fictional cartoon. Similarly, Flora explained in her portfolio reflective letter that she revised her ethnography after realizing that her initial draft had wandered from the intention of the assignment. Flora noted that in her first draft she was "really excited to just talk all about the show *Breaking Bad*." When she revised, she adjusted the essay's focus and trained it on working knowledge: "I shortened the description of the show and added more about the article by Simon, Dippo, and Schenke." Because the virtual ethnography is a new kind of assignment for many of the students, it is understandable that they might be drawn to a more familiar form of writing: they summarize or review the performance they have viewed or, as Soliday notes, simply "present" (36) rather than analyze or interpret their data. It is worth spending class time explaining that ethnographers do not view their fieldwork as an observation of a deliberate performance but of an acculturated behavior.

Additionally, sometimes students wrestle with the use of the theoretical lens. I found Bobby's discussion of ethics, for example, extremely confusing to read because he was actually discussing the workers' frame of reference for evaluating events and not their ethical decisions. In other words, clearly understanding each kind of working knowledge is essential to applying the lens appropriately. A second issue with the lens occurs when students assume that it leads to an objective view of the workplace. Vikki revealed in her Writer's Memo that "I chose to represent my paper this way, because I wanted to keep my opinion out of it. I just wanted the readers to be able to decide on their own what they think with the facts I gave." Vikki needed to understand that while she had indeed reported facts about occurrences at the workplace, her representations of those facts as different forms of working knowledge were acts of interpretation.

While Vikki struggled with the idea of being an *interested* rather than a *neutral* observer and never quite figured out how to adopt a stance on the topic, Graciela was fully aware of the subjective nature of the assignment. In recounting her peer review experience in her Writer's Memo, she explained that after reading two classmates' drafts, she realized that she had taken "a different approach" because she deliberately used first person in her conclusion in hopes that adding a personal opinion would induce her readers to "relate more easily." And Theresa was acutely conscious of the subjectivity involved. Her Writer's Memo showed that she was even aware of the subjective judgments being made by her classmates. She wrote, "The main idea of my paper is to show the positives presented in this work place. I feel like many people tend to focus on the negatives of a work place because it is easy to tear something apart, so instead I picked a fun place and tried to encourage someone to want work there." As I continue to ask students to complete this assignment, it is clear that my scaffolding needs to focus more intensively on the subjectivity that such an ethnographic assignment requires because some students, such as Vikki, apparently conflate the organized, systematic analysis of working knowledge with a scientific model that suggests objectivity.

Of course, it would be more encouraging to report on unmitigated success with the virtual ethnography, but that has not been the case. There are always misunderstandings and miscommunications, and some of the issues with this assignment arise out of those misunderstandings. But the demands of the assignment are challenging enough so that the students' struggles that I have described in this section may not be due to a lack of clarity in the directions so much as the challenge they face in their role as apprentices in the act of learning how to make knowledge. That is a worthwhile struggle to ask of my students, so I continue to look for better ways to scaffold the tasks involved, but I also acknowledge that valuable missteps will most likely take place, and they probably ought to.

## Conclusion

When I consider the complexities presented by the virtual ethnography assignment and weigh its benefits, I remain convinced that the assignment has enough value to justify including it in my first-year composition course. By viewing and re-viewing a video of a workplace, the students can learn how to become keener at observation in order to collect data for analysis. The lens-and-artifact approach of the assignment then allows the students to theorize about their findings so that they can, when their projects are successful, experience achieving the



authority to “speak about evidence” that Mary Soliday argues is central to effective writing (11). It is not just speaking about the evidence that the assignment requires but also taking a position, moving the student writers quite deliberately into presenting a subjective stance, but one buttressed by theory, data, and findings. In short, this assignment positions student writers as experts who know more about their topics than do their readers (including their instructor), a fact I am reminded of routinely as I read about TV episodes and films I have not seen and am instructed by my more knowledgeable virtual ethnographers.

I make no claim that the “virtual ethnography” is an authentic genre; it is, in fact, apprentice work. In some ways this assignment may well be a “mutt genre,” as Elizabeth Wardle terms it. Wardle describes “mutt genres” as writing assignments that “mimic” actual genres outside of the writing classroom but that within first-year writing course have “purposes and audiences [that] are vague or even contradictory” (774). However, I would contend that this “mutt genre” is neither vague nor contradictory. The virtual ethnography serves the purpose of moving apprentices closer to mastery in terms of observation, analysis, and inductive reasoning. Additionally, as the instructor, I can, in a sense, “visit” the sites of the students’ ethnographies by watching the same video. From the instructor’s perspective, this assignment removes the complications of assisting students doing research in far-flung locations. The virtual ethnography provides me with greater opportunities to monitor the students’ “field work” and to intervene in that process than if my fifty composition students were fanned out across the local counties surrounding my campus.<sup>{3}</sup> The virtual ethnography offers many of the advantages of an actual ethnography, and can serve as an introduction to ethnographic work. As a follow-up to this assignment’s introductory exploration of ethnography, instructors can move into more nuanced discussions of the ethics of actual ethnographic study: obtaining permission from subjects, interacting with those subjects, navigating the challenges of representing the lives and culture of human subjects.

In his final draft, one student, Paul, noted,

The main idea of my working knowledge analysis is that sometimes you see a job on television or in real life and then you think about how great or fun it might be to work there. But you never really take time to put yourself into the employee’s shoes and get to see what it is really like. I would say a very large majority of children and teens who have a television set have watched *Spongebob* at some point...The Krusty Krab is definitely recognizable and has become a symbol. The funny part is you don’t ask what it would be like to actually work there. You never wonder what it would be like for Mr. Krabs to be your boss, or to have Spongebob annoy you for your entire shift. I want people to think, “That would be the worst job ever.”

Paul’s ethnography illustrates the advantages I have outlined in this essay:

- The “virtual ethnography” assignment enables students to have the direct experience of gathering data as in an actual ethnography.
- The “virtual ethnography” results in the creation of knowledge that had not previously existed about the represented workplace.
- Because the virtual ethnography additionally stipulates that the writer-researcher present findings to readers who might be interested in working at the selected workplace, offering advice about whether such a choice is a wise one, the students must develop a stance on their findings.
- The stipulated audience includes their teacher, making the rhetorical situation one more conducive to establishing a writing identity as an authority speaking to readers who are less well-informed about the topic.
- By incorporating the observations of film or TV critics, the students also discover that multiple perspectives on the workplace exist, good preparation for dealing with the perspectives of those they actually observe in person in an actual ethnography.

In short, Paul’s report on having “seen” the familiar in an unfamiliar way is the result of his having examined the workplace through the assigned lens, leading him to conclude with a position statement grounded in his observations. Paul clearly feels authoritative enough to make his final statement, thanks to the virtual workplace ethnography assignment. Not every student succeeds to the degree that Paul has, but the assignment provides the opportunity for such success, so I plan to continue to ask my students to become authorities through conducting a “virtual workplace” ethnography.

## Appendix

## **WORKING KNOWLEDGE ETHNOGRAPHY**

In the selection Working Knowledge: What It Takes to Do the Job, from their book *Learning Work: A Critical Pedagogy of Work Education*, Roger I. Simon, Don Dippo, and Arleen Schenke write that “Knowing what to do and how to do it often requires much more than technical training... Working knowledge includes more than just the notion of a technical ability to perform certain tasks such as typing invoices...” (pp.27-8). Their point is that all work takes place at a *specific workplace* not a *generic workplace*, a *specific workplace* with its own culture. They go on to list six workplace features that define “working knowledge,” to which I’ve added a seventh:

- workplace materials (the “tools” and environment of the job)
- the language of work (the way workers speak at the job)
- workplace “facts” (the accepted realities of the job)
- skills and techniques (the abilities necessary to succeeding at work)
- evaluating workplace events (the way workers make judgments/determine reputations at work)
- rules and meanings (the spoken/unspoken “rules” that govern behavior at work)
- ethics at the workplace (the prevailing definitions of “right” and “wrong” at work)

## **A PAPER APPLYING THE THEORY OF WORKING KNOWLEDGE**

In this paper, you will function as an academic scholar by creating new knowledge based on your “field work” in observing a workplace. In this assignment, you will analyze your chosen workplace through the lens of theory. What that means is that you’ll apply a theory—Simon, Dippo, and Schenke’s “working knowledge”—to your chosen workplace. *For this paper, please use the theory of working knowledge to examine a workplace depicted in a TV show or a movie.* Your objective is to reach a value judgment about the workplace based on the theory.

In this paper, you’re going to do what we’ve been doing in class in when we analyzed workplaces by using the working knowledge concepts. So your job is to answer the question “Why would anyone want/not want to work at the workplace I’ve chosen to analyze?” and explain your views by referring to the kinds of working knowledge identified above.

## **FORMAT AND AUDIENCE**

This is an academic paper to be written for our class and me to read. In the paper, you will need to create a thesis (a central focus or main point) for your paper. Discuss as many or as few of the 7 kinds of working knowledge as you think appropriate in order to convey to readers what it is like to work at the *specific workplace*. Your job is to dig beneath the surface to analyze the working knowledge particular to the workplace. You will have to figure out the most effective organization for your paper; the 7 kinds of working knowledge are not in any particular order.

## **THE ADDITIONAL SOURCE REQUIREMENT**

This paper needs to be based not only on your own perceptions and observations, but on the perceptions and observations of others. Therefore, *an additional requirement of this project will be that you use at least one additional source of information about the workplace.* Most likely you will need to find a film or TV critic’s analysis of the film or television show, using some of her/his observations in your essay. Be sure to list this source appropriately in the Works Cited page.

## **Notes**

1. See Barbara Gleason. She discusses how her student ethnographers analyze the language of their workplaces “in actual contexts of use” (47), what Simon, Dippo, and Schenke would term “the language of the workplace” form of working knowledge. ([Return to text.](#))
2. See Barbara Gleason. She provides an example of one student ethnographer’s workplace ethnography that emphasized how her office setting’s physical decrepitude created an unhealthy and risky work environment (49). Simon, Dippo, and Schenke would call these features of the workplace “the materials of the workplace,” which includes the physical environment, another instance where reading Gleason’s cases studies illustrates how the Working Knowledge lens would be a useful tool for student ethnographers. ([Return to text.](#))

3. See Hawkins for a discussion of ethnography in online settings. The “virtual ethnography” assignment described here would quite readily fit into an online pedagogy. ([Return to text.](#))

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Virtual Workplace Ethnography from *Composition Forum* 32 (Fall 2015)

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