Field diary essay

An essay reflecting on your experiences on the trip, as recorded in your field diary, and informed by the academic literature.

In order to have the raw material for this essay, you will need to take notes in the field relating to, for example:

* Background knowledge (where you are and what is significant about it to the task at hand);
* What is the task you are engaged in?
* What can you see? What is happening around you?
* How do you feel about what is happening?
* Is the experience what you expected?

Some of these questions may be best answered at the end of the day rather than as you go along. However, you are recommended not to trust your memories for longer than that. The diary loses its value as empirical evidence if it is written too distantly from the events it recounts.

Note, the essay is NOT just a tidied up version of your diary. The idea of this exercise is that you reflect upon the methodological issues relating to fieldwork. This includes the experience of an unfamiliar culture as well as issues relating to the collection and analysis of field data, which would apply anywhere. You need to consider ‘the self’ as a positioned, situated *producer* of knowledge about your encounter with Berlin (on the fieldtrip), while also problematising the concepts of ‘the field’ as some place that you ‘get’ knowledge from. The aim is to develop a reflexive, subtle and theoretically-informed engagement with current theories about the politics and positionalities of being a researcher and how your situated positionality is significant in the way that you produce knowledge IN a different place, ABOUT that different place.

Therefore, while you should be alive to the nuanced aspects of German society as experienced on the field trip (and, preferably, the geographical aspects of this), you should also demonstrate an awareness of your own prior assumptions, prejudices, ways of thinking etc., and how these shaped your engagements with, and understandings of, your experience of Berlin.    
  
You should use your field-diary as a primary source to write a more formal piece of work that uses this raw material, but embeds it in the appropriate literatures (starting points in the reading list) to explore, consider and discuss the issues outlined above. However, anyone who simply lists what happened in the field, or who fails to embed their experiences in Berlin in the theory, will receive poor marks. This exercise is about thinking through your engagement with Berlin, as informed by theories relating to fieldwork specifically and reflexivity more generally. You use your diaries as first-hand, primary accounts and embed these in the literatures about fieldwork and your situated production of knowledge. Look at the exercise on reflective writing and different levels of reflection.

There is no set way to write these essays - not least as all your experiences and reflective writing will be different. Instead, we will be assessing your capacity to meld your diaries with these literatures and how well you can produce an interesting, informed and reflective piece of writing. Therefore, you can organise your essays how you feel it best reflects this task. For example, you could organise the essay around a theme such as ‘encounters with the residents’ rather than day 1, day 2 etc.

**Examples of sections from a field diary essay which illustrate how to link your reflective writing to the literature.**

***Berlin fieldtrip example:***

Kratz (1994), argues that when field researchers conduct ethnographic research they define a specific area of space and time. This is done in a localising strategy that locks off an area of physical space artificially for a period of time in order to study. […] Throughout the course of the trip I noticed this defining of the ‘field’ and ‘me’ became an essential part of observing and recording in my field diary. However, one issue from this is becoming too distanced from what you are researching in the field when considering comparisons and differences with home. Lorimer, (2003) further elaborates this idea of the field as a “Take scape” in which field researchers pick information they are reading from the landscape. This sees the landscape not as a fixed object but as a constantly changing scene that information can be drawn from. This involves things such as history, art and culture. Apart from taking notes on specific historical information, the field diary was also useful as a tool (Jackson, 1990) for exploring emotions and deepening understanding about different sites in Berlin. One site I found particularly significant was the Holocaust memorial. […]

When visiting the site you can feel why it is contested as it is often assumed that a memorial should be in a quiet area to allow personal reflection. When writing in my field diary in the context of self-reflection, one problem I found is that it can be difficult to become accustomed to the idea of writing down your emotions and feelings in a form that would be later valuable to use for information and reference back upon (Mcguinness & Simm, 2005). This wasn’t something that I only had a problem with and often recognised that a few other members of the group were experiencing this. However, I feel that the emotions that were produced from the memorial and its design were interesting to reflect upon. I later wrote in my diary:

“Prior to visiting the Holocaust memorial through personal understanding of historical events and the horror of the Holocaust you assume a stance of readiness for what you are going to experience. The thousands of concrete blocks create an imposing image but can be interpreted as a representation for the scale of the atrocity, the occurrence of a solar eclipse at the time I made the experience all the more emotive and real. As you walk deeper into the memorial the air becomes colder but creates a sense of a calm and reflective atmosphere...” (Field Diary, 20th March 2015)

***Rome fieldtrip example***:

I thought I knew all about Italian food before I went to Italy, but there was much more to Italian cuisine than I had imagined. The tastes were much stronger and purer than anything I’d tried in Italian restaurants in Britain. On my first night we had a pizza and I later wrote in my diary:

“It turned up with burnt pieces around the crust and I wasn’t impressed, but someone said that was how they are supposed to be. So I tried it and I couldn’t believe the taste of the tomatoes and the artichoke in the middle. Someone said they’d not be going back to Pizza Hut after this.” (Field Diary, 13th March 2011)

Some of the other students only wanted to find a McDonald’s ‘restaurant’ so they could eat something easy and unthreatening that they felt familiar with, but after that pizza I was more interested in trying out the local food. On the second night we found a small ‘trattoria’. We were a bit worried about going in, but they all spoke English (which made us feel more relaxed). “We didn’t know what to order…” I wrote later on that night, “…but they all tasted good, and the waiter explained that they were all classic Roman dishes, which made us feel like we were fitting in better than that group in McDonalds” (Field diary, 14th March 2011).

Some authors argue that when tourists ‘consume’ places like this, that they are not really engaging with place in an authentic way (Noble 1976, Payton 1998). But other writers insist that: “food is a central part of a foreign culture and any attempt to avoid it and eat globalised, familiar food is a wasted chance to engage with ‘difference’” (Wright 2001). I agreed with Wright – I enjoyed the sites and the visits of the fieldtrip, but the food was a real eye-opener that really made me think about how we think we know all about Italy and its food, but it’s actually different in quite a lot of ways. It was this kind of friction between the similar and the different (Blake, 2008) that really made me think about the nature of experiencing this ‘foreign’ country.