

FIELD NOTE WRITING GUIDE COMT/HDP 115 – Fall 2009

(adapted from Cole, 1996 & Polman, 2006)

For a quick tutorial on uploading your field notes go [here](#).

For sample field notes go [here](#) and [here](#).

Field notes should be written within 24 hrs of your site visit, *and* they should be submitted before you visit site again. This will prevent “contamination” of your impressions from your original visit from impressions developed in subsequent visits.

PRINT YOUR FIELD NOTES AS YOU SUBMIT THEM. Since at the end of the quarter you will be asked to turn in a portfolio which collects all of the field notes you have written, it is best if you print your field notes as you submit them. As you print them put them in a three ring binder. You will appreciate having done this at the end of the quarter – you won’t have to rush and print 20+ field notes in one shot and you will have all your field notes chronologically organized in one place (which, incidentally, will make the writing of your reflection paper a lot easier).

Field note sections

There are five sections to your field notes:

1. General site observations (setting the scene)
2. Narrative (the main section, like a play's script)
3. Game-task level summary (details about the specific games or tasks that you engaged in)
4. Reflection (like a postscript commentary in paragraph form)
5. Digital media (upload relevant pictures, documents, etc.)

The following explanations of the five sections of your field notes include questions and suggestions that are meant help you organize and write your field notes. Use these questions and suggestions as prompts to help you remember and identify details about your visit that are important for understanding life at the Learning Center. You can do this by having these questions handy when you write your field notes and/or reading them before and/or after you go to the Learning Center. Again, these are guiding questions and suggestions. You are not required to directly answer each question, but make sure that your field notes generally address the topics that these questions orient you towards.

1. General Site Observations (required)

Here you are setting the scene for those who will read your notes. Describe the things you notice when you come in. Describe the general atmosphere, your state of mind, your feelings, feelings expressed by others. This section describes the view from a wide angle.

It should contain observations about the site as you arrive and how you find your way in to the day's interactions. In later notes, you should mark changes, things that are unusual. This section is usually about one or two paragraphs long.

Guiding questions:

- How were you and the people you car-pooled with feeling before you/they arrived at the Learning Center?
- What did you notice when you arrived at the Learning Center? What types of interactions/activities were taking place before the site activities began?
- What was the feeling of the room, the general attitude of the group as a whole?
- What other activities in the neighborhood or in the world (current events) may be affecting the environment or atmosphere of the site?

2. Narrative (required)

In this section focus in on your and other's interactions at the site. Try to be as accurate, thoughtful and honest as you can. This is the longest section of the field note and contains several paragraphs. It should be as long as it takes you to describe your time at site.

Pointers:

- Reflect on how you interacted with the youth, how they interacted with you and how they interacted with each other.
- Be sure to note how you and the youth arrived at a specific activity, what their reaction was to the activity, and what difficulties or problems they encounter when dealing with the activity.
- Pay close attention to dialogue, language, and physical materials or tools used during the course of the activity. Remember that negative events such as ways the interaction breaks down, or misunderstandings about the activities, are as interesting as positive ones; in fact, they are very informative when we try to understand what goes on when things go well.
- Be careful to report behaviors rather than imputing your interpretation of the child's mental states. For example, "Carlos ran in, smiling, jumping, and waving a paper" vs. "Carlos was happy".
- Be sure and include the name(s) and age(s) of the youth you work with.
- If you engaged in online activities with the youth, be sure to include URLs of sites you visited (or at the very least, the search terms you used and/or the names of the site you visited)

- A productive strategy to use is to try to recall parts of the day that stand out in your mind, and work backwards and forwards in time from them.

Some aspects to attend to (do not feel that you need to do all of these, but use them for ideas/to jog memory):

Youth's understanding and interaction with an activity

- * No difficulty. We immediately got into our task. (how?)
- * Some difficulty (describe it). How did you and/or the youth go about solving it? How did you and/or the youth structure the situation? What kind of understanding did you and/or the youth start with? What happened afterwards? Were you and/or the youth successful in solving the problems?
- * Did the youth you were working with learn enough about the activity to be able to in the future complete the activity successfully by him/herself?
- * What strategies did you and/or the youth use in solving the problem?

Youth teaching others:

- * If they taught you or another youth how to do something, did it show that they understood how to do the activity being taught?
- * How did they teach it? Did you notice anything curious in their understanding? How much did you have to intervene and ask more specific questions?

Facilitation or hindrance caused by another person.

- * How did they react? How did you?
- * What was the affective (emotional) quality of the interaction? Were you and the others happy, sad, frustrated, angry, indifferent during the activity or during different periods?

What role did you and others assume in the activity?

- * Leader, teacher, peer, student, observer?
- * Were the kids you worked with eager, reluctant, timid, open-minded?
- * Did you and/or the kids enjoy the activity? Did you find it difficult, easy, or what?

Collaborative interaction between the others:

- * What was the nature of the collaboration? Were others helpful? Supportive? Actively engaged? How or how not?
- * Was there competition among the kids? Between you and the kids? Describe it. Was this healthy or destructive for the group as a whole?

Academic work

- * What kinds of academic work are the youth doing (math, writing, reading, general research) and at what grade level?
- * What research tools/techniques are used—book, index, table of contents, Web, search engine?
- * What forms of writing tasks do children readily engage in? resist?

completely avoid?

* What tools are used in the writing process (computers, pencil/pen and paper)? Which tools are most effective in engaging the writing process? Which are the least?

* Is writing and design an individual effort? Is it done in pairs? In groups? Around what themes and/or concepts (e.g., Web pages on history, personal pages, play) is it organized?

* What, if anything, do you do to foster writing? Do you elicit verbalizations of ideas to write down? Do you engage in “cowriting” tasks? Do you help with grammar/punctuation? If you do any of these things, how?

Computer Interaction and Digital Media Production

* Note talk around and about the computer. How do children work with the keyboard, use the mouse, use programs and their parts, make comments about particular parts of the machine, and deal with problems or obstacles as they arise?

* How much help do they ask for (or not) when trying to get an activity started?

* What kinds of digital media work are being done (Movie making, digital pictures, music making, programming)?

* How skillful is the youth at doing digital media production?

Degree of appropriate behavior (& what you mean by that)

* Do youth need to be reminded to behave?

* Do they “behave” spontaneously, even teach you or correct you about your conduct?

* Do they try to avoid rules or even fight you about them?

3. Game-task Level Summary (dependent on the kind of activity engaged in)

This section is to be completed if you played a game, typically an educational computer game. Simply describe the game and the level attained by the person playing it (but make sure that in the *Narrative* section you include details about how the person played the game.) This section is usually 1-2 sentences long.

4. Reflection (required)

In this section, state your thoughts and opinions about what happened at site. What have you learned about yourself and others? You can bring in your background experiences or any information that helps frame your thoughts about the interactions at site. Note any thoughts you might have about previous experiences that relate to what's going on, beliefs that may have been challenged or relevant to the way you acted, or ideas about what you may have wanted to do differently. How is the experience of being a part

of the Town and Country project, the class and writing field notes changing for you as the weeks go by? Also take this opportunity to comment on aspects of the activities that you think are particularly positive or problematic, and any other ideas that may be helpful in the next weeks for yourself, other students, or future classes.

5. Digital Media (optional)

The database where you submit your field notes is configured to let you upload digital files (documents, pictures, small movies, etc.). If you have a cel phone, digital camera, etc. we encourage you to take pictures of the events and objects you describe in your field notes. If you are going to take pictures ALWAYS ASK PERMISSION OF THOSE WHO WILL BE PHOTOGRAPHED. YOU ARE NOT TO ENGAGE IN BEHAVIORS THAT MAKE ANYONE FEEL LIKE AN OBJECT UNDER OBSERVATION. This also applies to taking pictures of materials. For example, you may help a child with their homework, in which case a digital image of the homework assignment would be very useful for you as tool for remembering the details of your interaction; HOWEVER, be tactful: ask the child for permission to take the picture and explain to him/her why you're doing it (in this case you want to review the picture later in order to think and write about your interaction, and this in turn will help you help the child in the future when you help the child with similar homework assignments).

ONE LAST THING!!!!: If something occurred during your visit that you think is especially critical for the instructor or TA to know, please highlight this in your field note by using ALL CAPS in the text that describes the incident. ALSO, please contact the instructor or TA directly (via email) if you are especially concerned.

GRADING

Remember, there is no way to say anything wrong in your field notes. We are looking for your honest observations. Your field notes will be graded on when and how thoroughly you report on your experiences at the site (see criteria listed below.) The richer, more detailed and complete your notes are, the better you we will be able to understand and evaluate changes at the Learning Center, and the more resources you will have to draw on in writing your final reflection and research papers. We will assess your field notes with respect to:

- *Timeliness:* A good field note is a one submitted within 24 hrs of your visit. The later you submit your notes (after the 24 window), the lower your grade will be.
- *Detail:* include details that are relevant for assessing learning and developmental changes at TCLC. The guiding questions above are there to orient you to those relevant details. A good field note addresses these questions (within the scope of the activities you engage in).

- *Completeness.* Typically when you write your field notes you will be writing about a series of events. Make sure that when you describe these events you do so in a way that allows the reader to understand how the event began, what happened during the event, and how the event ended.
- *Learning:* The instructor and TA will be reading and commenting on your notes. The comments will include questions and advice that are meant to help you develop your field note writing. The instructor and TA will be looking to see if you are trying to apply this advice in subsequent field notes (e.g. moving from a description that only states that a child solved a problem to one in which you describe what the child did to solve the problem.) If you disagree with the advice given, let the instructor know, preferably by replying to the comment in the field note database, or by emailing him directly.