



LESSON PLAN

Level:	Grades 11 to 12
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Duration:	3 - 4 hours

Online Cultures and Values



This lesson is part of *USE, UNDERSTAND & CREATE: A Digital Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools*:
<http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework>.

Overview

In this lesson, students are introduced to basic concepts of anthropology and ethnography and explore how they apply to online communities. After performing a digital ethnography project on the norms and values of an online community, students consider how a community's norms and values are formed and how they can be shaped and influenced.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- Learn key concepts of anthropology and ethnography
- Consider differences between online and offline communities
- Perform, document and analyze original research
- Consider ways in which individuals and small groups (including themselves) can influence the values and norms of a community in a positive way

Preparation and Materials

Photocopy the following handouts:

- *Anthropology Definitions*
- *Online Communities*
- *What is Ethnography?*
- *Digital Ethnography*
- *Ethnography Discussion Questions*
- *Digital Ethnography Project*
- *Online Cultures and Values: Changing Community Values*



And read the following:

- *Ethnography Discussion Questions: Teacher's Version*
- *Online Cultures and Values: Changing Community Values: Teacher's Version*

Procedure

The Interview

Start by asking students to imagine that they are being interviewed by scientists that come to study the students at your school. Tell them to think about either a group of people (e.g. the football team, the drama club) or a recurring time and place (e.g. the cafeteria at lunch, the library during a prep period). Now write the scientist's questions on the board:

1. Who are the *members* of this group? (Not the names of specific people, but a general description – “football players,” “students eating lunch,” etc.)
2. What is it *normal* for people in this group to do or say?
3. What is it *unusual* for people in this group to do or say?
4. What actions would get you *praise* in this group?
5. What actions would make people *angry* at you in this group?

Have the class go through the questions together with the cafeteria as an example. Prompt them to come up with at least three or four examples for questions 2-4. You will likely get answers similar to these:

1. Students in the cafeteria at lunch.
2. Buy and eat food; sit with your friends; play cards; watch videos on mobile devices; etc.
3. This could be almost anything not listed in the previous item, but make sure students understand it's something that *could* be done in the cafeteria (not something like washing your clothes, for instance) but would be seen as odd by others. (For example, ask students how they decide where to sit: if you sat down at a table where nobody you knew was sitting, would that be seen as odd?)
4. Buying someone lunch, helping someone pick up something they dropped, telling a funny joke, letting someone ahead of you in line.
5. Cutting in front of someone, heating up strong-smelling food in the microwave, eating someone else's food without asking.

If students aren't already familiar with the term, explain that the scientist is an *anthropologist* – someone who studies the *cultures* of different *communities*.



Anthropology

Distribute the handout *Anthropology Definitions*. Explain that both of those words are actually very hard to define, but for this class you'll use the definitions from the handout:

- Community: a group of people who share a space long enough for a common culture to evolve
- Culture: the *social norms* and *values* of a community (the word *culture* can also be used as a noun, in which case it means roughly the same as *community* above)
- Social norms: what's considered to be normal and abnormal behaviour in a culture
- Values: what a culture considers to be important, right and wrong
- Subculture: a smaller group within the community that may have different norms or values

Go through the “Important things to remember” section with the class and then the “types of communities.” Point out that people often belong to many different communities; that a community might be more than one type (for instance, a close-knit neighbourhood might be both a geographic and a friendship community); and that different people may see the same community differently (for instance, a person who is in a band because she loves to play music may see it as an interest community; another who is in the band mostly to hang out with her friends might see it as a friendship community.)

Online Communities

Now ask students whether it is possible for there to be communities *online*. Is it possible to have a community whose members are not in the same place? If so, is the whole Internet a community? Are Facebook, Twitter or Instagram communities?

Let students discuss the question for a few minutes without guiding them, then distribute the handout *Online Communities* and go through it with the class. When you've been through it, have them list as many different online communities as they can think of that they belong to.

Ethnography

If possible, show the short video *Ethnography* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6llzz3DIEWQ>); if you are unable to show the video, distribute the handout *What Is Ethnography?* Either way, have students answer the first seven questions in the handout *Ethnography Discussion Questions* and take them up in class (see *Ethnography Discussion Questions: Teacher's Version* for answers).

Now ask the students how doing ethnographic research on an *online* community might be different. Make sure the following points come up in the discussion:

Advantages

- It can be easier to join an online community – less need of gatekeepers
- It's easier to keep “field notes” because it's easy to record things that happen online (even if there's no formal log you can always do screenshots)



- It's easier for the researcher to be "invisible" if s/he wants to be and therefore not affect what s/he is watching

Disadvantages

- Identities in online spaces aren't always stable, so members of the group may appear or disappear
- It can be hard to get accurate demographic information (age, sex, etc.) about group members
- In some online communities like games, there can be a "skill barrier": if the researcher isn't good enough at the game (or can't put in enough time leveling up) s/he won't be able to see a lot of what happens in the group

Now distribute the *Digital Ethnography* handout, go through it with the class and have students answer the question on the *Ethnography Discussion Questions* handout.

Distribute the handout *Digital Ethnography Project* and go through it with the students. Assign due dates for students' field reports.

Establishing Norms and Values

After students have submitted their field reports, ask them how they think the norms and values of a community evolve. Explain two relevant findings about group consensus:

- 1) If ten percent of a group hold an unshakeable belief, that belief will be adopted by the majority of the group¹
- 2) Members of a group tend to move towards what they see as being the majority opinion of the group²

Put together, these two findings show that a belief that's held by as few as one in ten members of a group can have a very big impact on the overall norms and values of that group, if it's not countered by other voices. Looking at Experiment Four, for instance, *most* members of the community probably did not hold hateful views towards Muslims or LGBTQ people, but because a small number were very outspoken about those views, others saw them as enough of a "community norm" to either ignore what they were doing or to join in.

Now distribute the handout *Online Cultures and Values: Changing Community Values* and have students read it and answer questions 1-7 before taking them up in class. Assign question 8 for homework.

Assessment/Evaluation: The *Digital Ethnography Project* can be assessed or evaluated using the rubric on the next page.

1 J. Xie, S. Sreenivasan, G. Korniss, W. Zhang, C. Lim, B. Szymanski. "Social consensus through the influence of committed minorities." *Physical Review E*, 2011; 84 (1) DOI: 10.1103/PhysRevE.84.011130

2 Roger Brown, "Group Polarization," in *Social Psychology: The Second Edition* (New York: Free Press, 1986).



Anthropology Definitions

- Community: a group of people who share a space long enough for a common culture to evolve
- Culture: the *social norms* and *values* of a community
- Social norms: what's considered to be normal and abnormal behaviour in a culture
- Values: what a culture considers to be important, right and wrong
- Subculture: a smaller group within the community that may have different norms or values

Important things to remember:

Social norms describe *expected* behaviour while values describe what's considered to be morally good or bad. For instance, in most situations giving someone you don't know a present would be seen as odd, but not morally wrong.

However, some communities are more or less *conformist* than others, which is to say that things that go against social norms are more likely to be seen as also being morally wrong.

Social norms are not the same as rules, though they can overlap. Sometimes *breaking* a rule may be a social norm (for instance, drivers on highways are expected by others to go faster than the speed limit.)

People can be members of more than one community or subculture.

Types of communities:

Kinship: A community defined by family ties (though this can also include people you know *through* your family, such as friends of your parents or siblings)

Examples: _____

Friendship: A community defined by social ties

Examples: _____

Interest: A community defined by a common interest such as a profession, hobby or project

Examples: _____

Geographic: A community defined by *where* people live. People may live in several different geographic communities of different sizes (from their street all the way up to their country) but the culture of smaller communities tends to have a more powerful effect.

Examples: _____



Online Communities

Characteristics of an online community:

1. It is or has a “public” space where interactions between people can be observed by others
 A site where you watch videos but don’t interact with other people isn’t a community; a site where you watch videos and comment on them can be.

2. It is *persistent* (meaning it will still be there when you leave and come back)
 A game that you only play once isn’t a community, even if it has other players (unless you play it for a *long* time.) A game where the others keep playing when you log out can be.

3. People within it form personal relationships unique to the space
 If your social network exactly reproduces your offline relationships then it isn’t its own community, but if you have different friendships there than offline or if some of your relationships there are *different* than they are offline – for instance, you might talk to someone often in your social network but rarely offline – it is.
 People may participate in online spaces using their real names, using *pseudonyms* (handles or screen names) or, if the space allows it, fully anonymously. Which of these is considered normal is part of the *social norms* of the community.
 The same online *space* can contain many communities, and the same person may belong to several communities in the same space: Facebook, for instance, is home to millions of different communities, and the *social norms* and *values* you observe in each may be different depending on whether you’re interacting with your *kinship community* (your family and family friends) or your *friendship community* (your friends). Online communities develop over time, as the population of an online space becomes stable and social norms become established.

Below, list as many online communities you can think of that you are a part of. For each one, identify what *type* of community it is (kinship, friendship, interest, geographic, or more than one).

Community:

Type(s):



What is Ethnography?

Ethnography is the practice of studying the culture of a group (its values and behaviours, its unique language, and its beliefs) by directly observing that group. As a scientific tool it's mostly used by anthropologists and sociologists, but in the business world more and more advertisers and marketers are using it in order to understand what products and advertising messages will appeal to particular groups.

To be the subject of an ethnographic study, a group generally has to have at least twenty members and has to have existed in a distinct form long enough to have developed distinct practices, attitudes and language. However, the group does not need to have had the same members during that time: researchers who studied the ethnography of school playgrounds found consistent cultures (the same rules and terms used for playground games, for instance) years apart because the group had existed consistently over time, even though none of the original children were still there when the researchers returned.

Ethnographers work by immersing themselves in the culture they're studying, either just by observing or by actually participating in the culture's activities. Often a researcher will try to find a *gatekeeper*, someone who is able to help them get into subgroups or observe events they otherwise wouldn't be able to. While doing the research ethnographers keep extensive *field notes*, which are records of the things they've seen and done in the group. Ethnographers also often *interview* members of the group to get further information, and sometimes get *artifacts* (physical objects) that provide some insight into the group's culture.

Some limitations of ethnography as an approach are that doing it properly takes a lot of time in the field. One particular risk of ethnography is that by being part of a group for a long time, researchers may lose their *objectivity* and identify themselves too strongly with the group to be able to think clearly about it. Another is that by participating in the group (or by publishing research on the group) the researcher could cause harm to the group or to particular members of it.

The final product of ethnographic research is usually the *final report*, which is written as a narrative (like a story) and tries to give the reader both the *experience* of what it's like to be a member of the group and *insight* into the values, norms and language of the group.



Digital Ethnography

As well as field observations, ethnographers can learn about a community's social norms and values through what are called *norm breaching experiments*. These are called that because the researcher tries to test the boundaries of normal behaviour by doing something that they believe to be outside the social norms of the group and recording the result. How members of the group respond to this can give a lot of insight into what the group considers to be normal and important. This kind of experiment was pioneered by sociologist Harold Garfinkel, who had his students behave as though they were boarders (paying guests) in their homes. His hypothesis was that the expected behaviour for a boarder (to always be polite to the other people in the house) was not the same as that of a family member, and it was proven right when students' family members reacted as though they were ill, insane or making fun of them when they spent a day being only polite.

Christian Sandvig at the University of Illinois has developed a series of similar experiments to test norms in online culture, some of which are listed below. The final experiment listed was done by the MIT GAMBIT lab. Once you have read the description of all of the experiments, answer question 8 on the *Ethnography Discussion Questions* handout for each one on lined paper.

Experiment One: Oversharing

The researcher chose an acquaintance that s/he did not know well. For a 24-hour period, the researcher greatly increased the number of times s/he contacted that acquaintance online and the amount of information sent, sending messages like "I am getting on the bus," "I am having lunch," "I just got to class," etc.

Experiment Two: Way Off-Topic

Over a three-day period, the researcher left a large number of off-topic comments on contacts' social network posts.

Experiment Three: Inquisitor

The researcher made social media contacts with five strangers (either people not known at all or friends-of-friends) and posted public comments on their walls introducing themselves and asking questions about the new contact. If the researcher and new contact had a friend in common the researcher did not mention or refer to that common friend. If the new contacts responded to the initial post, the researcher followed up with more questions and continued to do so until the new contact stopped responding.

Experiment Four: Open Identity

The researcher played an online game using screen names that directly referred to his/her religious affiliation or sexual orientation ("Proud2BMuslim," "GayPride90.") Other than the screen names, the researcher did not change anything in how s/he behaved.



Ethnography Discussion Questions (answer on separate paper)

1. What do ethnographers study?
2. What characteristics does a group need to be the subject of an ethnographic study?
3. In what academic disciplines is ethnography most often used?
4. What is a *gatekeeper* and why are they important to ethnography?
5. How do ethnographers collect data?
6. What are the particular risks of ethnographic research? How do you think these could be avoided or lessened?
7. What does the final product of ethnographic research look like? What is its purpose?
8. For each of the experiments described on the *Digital Ethnography* handout, identify:
 - a) What you think the *hypothesis* of the experiment was (what theory was it trying to prove or disprove) about this community's norms or values?
 - b) What do you think were the results of the experiment?
 - c) What does that demonstrate about the *social norms* and/or *values* of the community?



Ethnography Discussion Questions: Teacher's Version

1. What do ethnographers study?
The culture of a group (its values and behaviours, its unique language, and its beliefs)
2. What characteristics does a group need to be the subject of an ethnographic study?
At least twenty members and to have existed in a distinct form long enough to have developed distinct practices, attitudes and language
3. In what academic disciplines is ethnography most often used?
Anthropology and sociology
4. What is a gatekeeper and why are they important to ethnography?
Someone who can provide access to parts of the community the researcher otherwise couldn't reach
5. How do ethnographers collect data?
Field notes, interviews, artifacts
6. What are the particular risks of ethnographic research? How do you think these could be avoided or mitigated? Losing objectivity or harming the community.
Possible answers for the first risk: Limit how long you spend in the community; have a colleague who isn't part of your field work regularly review your work. Possible answers for the second: Only participate in events that won't have a significant effect on the community; anonymize or pseudonymize the community and its members, so publishing your research won't affect them.
7. What does the final product of ethnographic research look like? What is its purpose?
A narrative report that tries to give the reader both the experience of what it's like to be a member of the group and insight into the values, norms and language of the group.
8. For each of the experiments described on the *Digital Ethnography* handout, identify:
Experiment One: Oversharing
 - a) What you think the *hypothesis* of the experiment was (what theory was it trying to prove or disprove) about this culture's norms or values?
Community members are expected to only share interesting or relevant events or opinions.
 - b) What do you think were the results of the experiment?
Contacts were annoyed by the researcher's behaviour, with some blocking or otherwise cutting off contact with the researcher.



- c) What does that demonstrate about the *social norms* and/or *values* of the community?

The norm is to only share interesting or relevant events or opinions. "Oversharing" is seen as a disrespectful behaviour, contrary to community values, and results in strong reactions such as hostility, cutting off contact or ostracism (removing the person from the community). The community values a respect for members' time and attention, and in this context violating that is considered a major breach of community values.

Experiment Two: Way Off-Topic

- a) What do you think the hypothesis of the experiment was (what theory was it trying to prove or disprove) about this culture's norms or values?

Community members expect each other to respect the established subjects of threaded conversations.

- b) What do you think were the results of the experiment?

Most contacts ignored the researcher. A small number responded with confused or annoyed comments.

- c) What does that demonstrate about the *social norms* and/or *values* of the community?

It is the norm for community members to respect the topics of threaded conversations and not to post off-topic comments. Off-topic posting is seen as an unusual but not hostile behaviour, and does not result in strong reactions. The community values a respect for members' time and attention, and in this context violating that is considered a minor breach of community values.

Experiment Three: Inquisitor

- a) What do you think the *hypothesis* of the experiment was (what theory was it trying to prove or disprove) about this culture's norms or values?

Community members prefer not to interact at length with non-friends on social networks.

- b) What do you think were the results of the experiment?

Most of the subjects accepted the friend request, but almost none answered the questions posed by the researcher in a public space: some did so in private messages, others not at all. Most subjects responded politely but eventually cut off contact, while a smaller number responded with hostility or suspicion.

- c) What does that demonstrate about the *social norms* and/or *values* of the community?

It is a norm of the community to accept most friend requests, even if the person making the request is not personally known to the subject, but contacts are not expected to interact in a significant way with people they do not know personally. The community values a respect for personal ties and violating that is considered a major breach of community values that may lead to hostility, cutting off contact or ostracism.



Experiment Four: Open Identity

- a) What do you think the *hypothesis* of the experiment was (what theory was it trying to prove or disprove) about this culture's norms or values?

Members of the community are hostile to open expressions of non-mainstream religion or sexual orientation.

- b) What do you think were the results of the experiment?

Researchers encountered significant amounts of abusive language from other players, much of it specifically referencing their identity, and in some cases were even killed within the game by their own team members.

- c) What does that demonstrate about the social norms and/or values of the community?

It is a norm of the community not to identify yourself if you belong to a non-mainstream religion or sexual orientation. Violating this norm is considered a severe breach of community values and may result in open hostility; members who encounter this behaviour even feel justified in engaging in behavior that would otherwise be against community norms, such as attacking members on the same team.



Digital Ethnography Project

For this project, you will be doing an ethnographic study of an online community. You will choose the community, with my approval. If it is a community that you are not already familiar with, you will do *field observation* as described in the handout *What is Ethnography?* If it is a community that you are already familiar with, you will do a *breaching experiment* as described in the *Digital Ethnography* handout. In either case, you will be trying to identify the *norms and values* of the culture.

If you are doing a field observation, you must provide at least 10 *field notes* (records of your observations – logs, screen shots, etc.) and two *interviews* with community members. You will use these to support your conclusions about the community's norms and values. *Note that in general, field observation does not begin with a hypothesis: you collect data first and draw conclusions as you are making your observations and afterwards.* If members of the community use their real names or pseudonyms that would make it possible to identify them, change or remove their names from your field notes.

If you are doing a breaching experiment, you must provide your hypothesis and records of the results of the experiment with at least *three* subjects. *Do not* provide the identities of your subjects and do not use other members of the class as subjects.

Whether you are doing a field observation or an experiment, your project should answer the following questions about the community you're studying:

Definition

1. How does this community meet the three characteristics of an online community defined in the *Online Communities* handout?

Norms

2. What *can* you do or say as a member of this community?
3. What *can't* you do or say?
4. What *must* you do to be a member of this community?
5. What must you *not* do to remain a member of this community?

Values

6. What traits or qualities are *admired* by members of this community?
7. What traits or qualities are *looked down on* by members of this community?



Online Cultures and Values: Changing Community Values

Did you know...

More than half of Canadian Grade 11 students see racist or sexist content online at least once a week

Three-quarters of Canadian Grade 11 students believe it's important to say something about racism or sexism online so people know it's wrong

Half of Canadian Grade 11 students *don't* say anything about racism or sexism online when they see it because they believe "it's not my place to say anything."¹

Just like in the offline world, the norms and values of online communities *can* change. This change can be positive or negative, and it can happen because of the members of the community, the hosts of the community (the people who own and/or run the online space the community is in) or both.

Case Study: Riot Games and League of Legends

League of Legends, a multiplayer online game, had developed a bad reputation for toxic player behaviour. The game's owner, Riot Games, had tried to reduce this by punishing the worst offenders, but found that this made very little difference in the overall culture of the game. Jeffrey Lin, Riot's lead designer of social systems, did an analysis of reports of bad player behaviour and found that the "worst" players – the one percent of players who were *consistently* racist, sexist, or homophobic – were only responsible for five percent of the bad player behaviour. The majority of bad behaviour was actually committed by players who were rated overall as "good" or "neutral." They also found that 10 percent was the magic number for the overall culture of the game: "Even though a small minority is truly negative, they can control your community's perception by themselves. It just takes... 11 percent of negative posters on a forum discussion to change the direction of the forum discussion."²

Lin concluded that "we needed to reset cultural norms. The problem was that players were logging into games, doing these kinds of things, and then thinking, 'This is normal. It's okay here.' We needed to reset that. We needed to change it so that it was more like real life. Players were telling us things like, 'Well, in real life, I'd never do something like that, but online it's different.'" Lin also decided that it was vital to involve other players in the process of dealing with bad behaviour, to encourage them not to be silent when they saw it: "Silence is reinforcement. What silence is telling us is that in this society ... we believe this is okay."

Based on these findings, Lin's team took the following steps:

- 1) Identifying and banning the toxic one percent
- 2) Creating a *community tribunal* in which players were given the chance to establish what they thought were positive social norms and rule on cases of bad player behaviour
- 3) Reporting the tribunal's decisions *publicly* (so the whole community could see them) and notifying the players specifically what behaviour led to the punishment and why it was a violation of community norms.

The result was not just a reduction in bad behaviour, but an increase in reporting and player engagement in the reporting system.

1 Steeves, Valerie. *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Encountering Racist and Sexist Content Online*. MediaSmarts, 2014.

2 Nutt, Christian. "More carrot, less stick: Jeffrey Lin on tweaking *League of Legends* player behavior." *GamaSutra*, March 15, 2015.



Online Cultures and Values: Changing Community Values

Questions

Fact Questions

1. What surprised Jeffrey Lin about who was responsible for most of the bad behaviour in the game?
2. How did Lin find that a small minority could have a big effect on the culture of the game?
3. How did the culture of the game affect how players behaved?
4. Why did Lin find it was important to encourage players to be a part of changing the game culture?

Opinion Questions

5. What are some reasons why students might not feel it's "their place" to speak out about racism and sexism when they encounter them online?
6. How might they have gotten a distorted view of how accepted (and acceptable) these things are in their online communities?
7. How might they (or the hosts of the community) help those students feel as though they have a right to speak up?

Discussion

8. Think about the culture of the community you studied and identify one norm or value that you think is harmful. (This doesn't have to be as serious as what's described in the case study: it could be norms around friending and unfriending, posting and commenting on photos, gossip, etc.)



Online Cultures and Values: Changing Community Values: Teacher's Version

Questions

Fact Questions

1. What surprised Jeffrey Lin about who was responsible for most of the bad behaviour in the game?
Most of the behaviour was not caused by the worst players (though they did more than their share) but by players rated as “neutral” or “positive.”
2. How did Lin find that a small minority could have a big effect on the culture of the game?
He found that if 11% or more of the posters on a forum were negative, the overall tone of the forum would become negative.
3. How did the culture of the game affect how players behaved?
Players felt that bad behaviour, which they would not have considered acceptable offline, was an acceptable part of the game.
4. Why did Lin find it was important to make players responsible for the tribunal that judged player behaviour?
By participating in the tribunal process, players took responsibility for the culture of the game. Because they came from the players, the tribunal's decisions helped to establish positive social norms as well as punishing individual players.



Task Assessment Rubric: Digital Ethnographic Project

	Learning Expectations	Achievement
<p>Use</p> <p>Skills and competencies that fall under “use” range from basic technical know-how – using computer programs such as word processors, web browsers, email, and other communication tools – to the more sophisticated abilities for accessing and using knowledge resources, such as search engines and online databases, and emerging technologies such as cloud computing.</p>	<p>Correctly identifies the characteristics of an online community.</p> <p>Collects data from an online space using digital tools.</p>	<p>Insufficient (R)</p> <p>Beginning (1)</p> <p>Developing (2)</p> <p>Competent (3)</p> <p>Confident (4)</p>
<p>Understand</p> <p>Understand includes recognizing how networked technology affects our behaviour and our perceptions, beliefs and feelings about the world around us.</p> <p>Understand also prepares us for a knowledge economy as we develop information management skills for finding, evaluating and effectively using information to communicate, collaborate and solve problems.</p>	<p>Analyzes data and identifies the norms and values of an online community.</p>	<p>Insufficient (R)</p> <p>Beginning (1)</p> <p>Developing (2)</p> <p>Competent (3)</p> <p>Confident (4)</p>
<p>Create</p> <p>Create is the ability to produce content and effectively communicate through a variety of digital media tools. It includes being able to adapt what we produce for various contexts and audiences; to create and communicate using rich media such as images, video and sound; and to effectively and responsibly engage with user-generated content such as blogs and discussion forums, video and photo sharing, social gaming and other forms of social media.</p> <p>The ability to create using digital media ensures that Canadians are active contributors to digital society.</p>	<p>Successfully anonymizes research subjects.</p> <p>Uses digital tools to organize and present data and conclusions.</p> <p>Synthesizes research into a successful narrative report.</p>	<p>Insufficient (R)</p> <p>Beginning (1)</p> <p>Developing (2)</p> <p>Competent (3)</p> <p>Confident (4)</p>

