

Overview:

Thick description, a term adopted by Clifford Geertz from philosopher Gilbert Ryle, is an ethnographic methodology where the researcher attempts to explain the context and cultural significance behind a place, event, or phenomenon. This lesson challenges participants to practice thick description and dig deeper into how culture impacts how people design and use physical spaces. They will choose a space to observe and then write a thick description essay based on the notes that they take.

Note: This activity pairs well with the Emic Perspective PowerPoint (in the [Downloads](#) of this tool and the [Emic Perspective tool](#)).

Objectives:

As a result of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Observe a space through analytical and cultural lenses.
2. Make connections between physical space, behavior, and culture.
3. Write a thick description based on their observations of a space.

Time:

2 hours

Group Size:

Entire group

Materials:

“Thick Description: Methodology” by Tanya M. Luhmann (in [Downloads](#)), paper and writing utensils or a tablet/smartphone/laptop to take notes.

Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:

- Denial
- Polarization
- Minimization
- Acceptance

AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:

Openness:

- To initiate and develop interactions with culturally different others.
- To suspend judgment in valuing interactions with culturally different others.

Curiosity:

- To ask complex questions about other cultures.
- To seek out and articulate answers to these questions that reflect multiple cultural perspectives.

Activity Instructions:

1. First, ask participants to read “Thick Description: Methodology” by Tanya M. Luhmann and prepare to discuss the following questions:
 - How would you define thick description? What about ethnography?
 - What is the relationship between thick description and ethnography?
 - How can you use thick description to understand culture?
 - What are the qualities of a piece of writing that uses thick description?
 - Optional question if incorporating the Emic Perspective PowerPoint: How would you use the emic perspective to generate a thick description?
2. Ask participants to choose a space to observe. This should be a space where they feel safe sitting for at least an hour at a time yet somewhere that they are relatively unfamiliar with and do not frequent regularly (i.e., they should get outside of their comfort zone but not in the panic zone where they feel threatened or unsafe). For example, they might choose to visit a museum or a park in a little-known neighborhood for them.
3. Before visiting, ask participants to reflect on the following questions:
 - Why did you choose this space to observe?
 - What are some of your preconceived notions or expectations about this space?
 - What do you hope to find out about this space, in terms of culture?
4. Have participants visit the space, taking with a note-taking tool (paper and writing utensil, smartphone, tablet, laptop, etc.). Ask them to jot down notes in two separate columns or areas -- one for observations of their chosen space, and the other for their impressions of their observations. Invite them to use their senses and the following questions to help them focus their observations:
 - What are the physical objects in this space? What do they look like? How are they arranged?
 - Who are the people in this space?
 - What do they look like?
 - What are they wearing?
 - What is their mood or behavior like?
 - What are they saying?
 - How are they interacting with the space?
 - How are they interacting each other?
 - What do you smell in this space? Where do these smells seem to be coming from?
 - What do you hear in this space?
 - What are you physically sensing with your body? Elaborate.

It might be helpful for them to close their eyes for a bit and concentrate on their senses

Note: Participants might also consider, if they're comfortable, talking with people who are using the space and asking them questions such as: “How do you feel about this space?” “How do you feel about the other people who use this space?” “Why do you choose to use this space?” However, if participants choose to add this step, they need to be aware that some individuals they approach may decline to talk with them.

5. Ask participants to take things a step further after their observation and to start interpreting or analyzing what they observed:

- What do these observations reveal about the culture of this space?
 - What do these observations reveal about you as an observer and someone who doesn't feel like they belong in this space (yet)?
 - What do you believe are some of the cultural norms and values of the people who created this space? What about the people who are occupying it?
 - What was your comfort level during this activity?
 - What was most challenging?
6. Have participants submit a 1-2 page, single-spaced, thick description based on their notes. They should aim to *show* rather than *tell* about their observed space (i.e., they want to use specific, descriptive language so that anyone reading it can envision the space and imagine its cultural significance).

Related Tools:

- [Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight](#)
- [Draw a House](#)
- [Emic Perspective](#)