

Classroom Connection:

*Material Culture Observation and Interviewing Exercise**

Students observe their campus/off-campus surroundings in search of elements that could be interpreted as “Richmond,” “RVA,” or “BLKRVA” (or all). As part of their observational tour, students collect a material object—a flyer, magazine, menu item, gadget, logo, item of clothing, food item, etc., or a photo of the actual object—as a token of their findings. Each student offers one object in class to practice linking close observation, interpretation, and hypothesis formulation.

Prompts

- **Exchange your object with another student without giving each other any information about the actual object.** (If you took a photo, your object/evidence will be the object itself, not the photo.)
- **Spend a few minutes observing the object and writing down your findings.** What is it made of? What does it look like (color, shape, size)? What would most people call this object? Is it a common object that you’ve seen before? If so, where? Where could it be from? Does the object tell you a story or represent an idea? If so, what story/idea? What are other unique and noteworthy details? **(5 min.)**
- **Based on your initial observation, what else would you like to know about this object/evidence that is not immediately clear from your observation?** Write down a list of questions for your interviewee. **(5 min.)**
- **Interview your partner using the questions in your list. (10 min.)**
- **Write down what you learned from the interview. (5-10 min.)**
 - What new facts did you learn about that specific object/piece of evidence?
 - What hypotheses can you make about the role and significance of this type of object in the context of Richmond/RVA? (*For example, such objects might represent Richmond/RVA/Black RVA because....*)
 - What did you learn about your partner (and possibly your partner’s relation to Richmond/ RVA) during this exercise? **(optional)**
- **Share your interview experience with the class. (10-15 min.)**
- **Post-interview reflection (homework assignment)**
 - Did the interview answer all your questions? Did it clarify any doubts you might have about the object/evidence? Why/why not?
 - Decide whether you could have asked different questions or phrased your questions differently.
 - Did you ever feel that you jumped to a conclusion based on your observation? Did the interview help you see some assumptions you might have made?

*Lesson adapted from Bonnie Stone Sunstein’s *Collaborative Artifact Exchange* (see Liu, Rossina Zamora and Bonnie Stone Sunstein. 2016. “Writing as Alchemy: Turning Objects into Stories, Stories into Objects.” *Journal of Folklore and Education*. 3:60-76).

Visual Analysis Exercise

This exercise is in two parts, as the main pedagogical goal is to have students practice close observation before rushing to interpretation. In Part 1, share the Reuters image of two Black ballerinas posing on the Robert E. Lee statue without offering any contextual information*. Then put students in groups (or Zoom breakout rooms) and ask them to observe and reflect on the image. In Part 2, ask students to retrieve contextual information for the image and combine what they learned from their initial analysis with what they found through research.

*Note: This photo may contain language inappropriate for younger students. You may identify another image to substitute for it to do this exercise.

Prompts

PART 1

- **Describe the photo in all its detail.** (Main subject/s, composition, arrangement, color, lighting, camera angle, scale, location, text, anything else that strikes your attention)
 - *Stick to what you see, don't interpret just yet.*
- **Describe the photo background in all its detail, starting with the statue.**
- **Describe the main subjects in detail.** (What are they wearing? What are they doing? What are their facial and body expressions? Approximate age? Anything else worthy of notice?)
- **Describe the emotions that the image conveys to you.**
- **Decide what elements in the image help convey those emotions.** (Subjects' positions, attire, or pose? Lighting? Camera angle? Anything else?)
- **Decide what main idea or message the image conveys based on your observations.** (An image can convey several and sometimes conflicting messages or connotations, but one meaning or idea usually stands out.)
 - This is where your interpretation comes in—make sure you base your interpretation on concrete evidence you observed in the image.
 - Is anything about the image actually unclear or contradictory? Might there be multiple messages? Is anything left to personal interpretation?
- **If the image offers more than one meaning or idea, what are some other connotations?**

PART 2

- Find out what the context for this photo is—where was the picture taken, when, how, and by whom. (Date, location, photographer, more details.)
- Based on the new information, decide what the purpose and audience are and why.
- Based on the new information, decide what the purpose for including the two ballerinas. What might be the dancers' goals in participating in this project? What do you want to ask them?
- Based on the new information, can you confirm your initial thoughts about this photo and its contents? Did you come up with new ideas or meanings? If so, what are they?
 - After answering these questions in small groups, students discuss their answers with the rest of the class.

Neighborhood Observation Tour

Introduce this exercise by reading and discussing Walter Littman's 2020 article. Viewpoint: Walk this Way. Reconsidering Walking for the Study of Cultural Landscapes. *Buildings & Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum*. 27.1:3-16. Ask students to answer the following questions in groups.

Prompts

PART 1

- How did walking help the author learn about the places he walked around? What did he learn? Provide at least one example from the text to support your points.
- According to the author, how does our walking perception of a city differ from our perception while looking at a map? What are the added benefits of walking?
- In what ways can walking become a form of research according to the author? What did he research while walking?

PART 2

- What do you think (as a group) is the most interesting fact, example, or idea in the article and why?
- In your opinion (as a group), how does your walking perception of your own city, neighborhood, or campus differ from your perception while driving? What can you observe while walking that you cannot observe while driving? Provide at least one example.
- List at least three examples of material culture that you can observe through walking versus driving around VCU campus. (Browse through our material culture object working list for examples.)

Walking Tour Prompts

1. Observe

- Street names, types of buildings, building names, types of businesses, food options, grocery options, presence of green space, presence of sidewalks, ramps, bike parking, car parking, bus stops, trash collection, care and maintenance of common areas, diversity of the population, age/gender/ethnicity/appearance of people in the street or working
- Note:* This exercise does not mandate physical contact with other people; you should practice social distance at all times, wear a mask, and carry sanitizer with you.

2. Document

- Take photos of everything you observe. (Avoid taking close-up photos of people without asking permission.)

3. Reflect

- Did you notice any recent changes in the socioeconomic structure of the neighborhood? (For example, gentrification, changes in business ownerships)
- What are dining options?
- What are grocery options?
- What kinds of businesses do you see?
- What kinds of people do you see (students, professionals, families, etc.)?

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- How walkable is the area?
- Can you easily move around using public transportation?
- Based on your answers so far, is this a rich/poor neighborhood? (examples)
- How diverse and inclusive is it?
- How safe?
- Is the area environmentally friendly?
- Is there anything else you never noted before?
- Do you think you might find the neighborhood to be less safe/diverse/inclusive/walkable if you went there at a different time of the day or drove your car/biked/rode the bus?
- Do you think others might find the neighborhood to be less safe/diverse/inclusive/walkable/? Who would that be?
- Overall, what have you learned about the neighborhood through this exercise?
- How does your perspective of this area through walking differ from your perception while driving or taking the bus?

Memorial Building Exercise

Students build and display a memorial so others can see it, albeit just family, roommates, or friends. They may honor a family member, a pet, or friend who recently passed; a Covid-19 victim they knew personally; a specific group who were victims of the pandemic, such as healthcare workers; a recent victim of police brutality; someone who died because of social/racial injustice and discrimination; or a famous person whose recent death particularly affected them. They can create the display using any kind of design or material. In planning the memorial, ask students to follow these guidelines.



Memorial created for Marcus-David Peters's birthday at the Lee Circle (also known as Marcus-David Peters circle) in Richmond.

Prompts

Building. The display should include the following elements:

- At least one photo/image of the person to whom the memorial is dedicated
- At least a couple of objects representing the person's life experiences, values, beliefs, lifestyle, worldview, etc.
- Flowers, plants, or other objects of décor (This may or may not represent your connection with the person.)

- (Optional) A dish or meal that represents your connection with the person such as shared preferences or values, or the memory of a shared meal
 - *For example*, an athlete devoting the memorial to a fellow athlete might choose a food that is staple in an athlete's diet.
 - *Note* that someone can prepare the meal from scratch, together with family/friends or buy it.

Documenting. Once students create their memorial displays, ask them to prepare photo documentation illustrating the following:

- The creation process (This helps build a narrative for the project. What did you have in mind? From where did you start, and where did your idea take you?)
- The final product
- Specific details they want to draw attention to

Writing. The final writing component should include the following elements:

1. A description of the display (using both texts and photos where relevant):

- For whom is this memorial and why?
- How did you decide on the location for your display?
- What elements did you include and why? How do they represent the person? How do they represent your connection with the person?
- How did you design the layout?
- What main idea (or argument) are you trying to convey?
- What personal/family/social/cultural values does your display reflect?

2. A brief description of the memorial-making process (using both text and photos where relevant)

3. (Optional) A description of the dish or meal

- Main ingredients, cultural/family origins if relevant, reason for choosing the dish
- A brief description of the process of making the food—grocery shopping, ingredients, cooking (for home-cooked meals).

4. Reflection.

- What did you find most interesting about this assignment and why?
- If you prepared the meal yourself, what did you think of this experience?
- How triggering was this assignment, especially if your subject was related to the pandemic or another topic you find difficult?
- How useful did you find this assignment from a mindfulness perspective?