

On Tattoos and Tangents: Discussing Research in the Classroom

by Martha C. Sims

During the past few years, I have been researching tattoos. The idea began with a question volleyed across the room from one student to another in the final minutes before one of my college composition classes began.

“I got a tattoo this weekend.”

“What does it say?”

What does it say? My question would have been, “What’s it a tattoo of?” That question soon after morphed into another question for me: Why are so many people being tattooed with words—and often with words alone? What happened to the artistry of the image, the symbols?

In composition classes in which folklore or culture is the content focus, tattooing is one of the first topics I throw into the mix for discussion. As a contemporary cultural practice, it is a subject students are immediately able to talk about, regardless of their attitudes about the custom. Discussion might begin with students bringing up stereotypes, which can easily be challenged by their classmates—whether by a student orally presenting an argument or showing her tattoo. I often find myself not having to assert any teacher’s authority to challenge those stereotypes.

One beauty of the subject is that it is not perceived as sacred or antiquated. It is raw and real enough to interest students, so sometimes it takes a while for them to realize that they are participating in an academic discussion. Often, it is not until I step in and begin noting on the board the territory we have covered, writing out the primary concepts the students themselves have brought out in their discussion, that they recognize the fruits of their analytical labor.

They are practicing critical-thinking strategies and beginning to articulate what can be significant about cultural practices, what misperceptions we harbor about physical presentation and



aesthetics, and how consciously or unconsciously members of different groups express identity through these permanent marks on their bodies. Through this process, they are beginning to understand how tradition and folklore are not just quilts and fairytales. They are also beginning to understand how research and academic arguments can be grounded in their own questions and ideas.

In teaching about research and writing, about exploring and expanding theories, I have found the topic of tattoos to be fruitful in many ways. It is certainly an effective icebreaker with my college students, yet it serves as more once students realize that tattoos have been a legitimate subject of study for me—and can be for them, too. As my own questions about text-based tattoos have grown into a research subject, I have integrated more discussion of tattoos and tattooing into my classes, and the subject has become a vehicle for illustrating the breadth of research available in studying folklore. One of the most powerful aspects of this topic is how it opens up many avenues for discussion and allows for a variety of approaches to research. The class shifts to the broader focus of body modification and cultural implications, the similarities and differences of various modifications and practices.

Classroom Connections

Question: What examples can we discover where different body aesthetics and body modifications mean different things?

For example, stereotypes of tattooed people in the U.S. continue to be somewhat negative, despite the changing perceptions occurring. Yet, in other cultures, especially historically, tattoos have been markers of higher status.

Discussion: How does this author's opening anecdote help us understand the research process?

What can we learn about formulating a good research question?

What are the steps to developing a good research plan for local culture topics?

Opportunities and Obstacles Inherent in

Folklore Research

Using tattoos as a topic, I present students a hypothetical research situation: If you were planning on researching tattoos, what would you need to know before you went into the field? Students brainstorm (in small groups or as the entire class, with me as their secretary) and discover that their own experiences, attitudes, and questions shape what they need to know. Do they want background information on apprenticing or the artistic and technical process because they want to study artists? Would some knowledge of cultural symbols or phrases be useful? Would it be beneficial to know more about perceptions of tattoos in particular organized religions? Then we consider what research techniques will provide the proper tools to address the questions: use of standard research databases on history, on art, on culture or conversations with people who have tattoos or don't. As the course moves forward, I handle other stages of the process similarly. When we discuss researcher ethics and rapport, we again take the hypothetical approach, selecting a number of different types of members of the tattoo community and considering how best to approach them and build rapport. This then leads to ways of developing interview questions and considering how to follow up interviews, whether performing additional interviews, returning to library research, redirecting the inquiry, or a combination of these strategies.

For students unfamiliar with ethnographic research, study of contemporary tattoos and tattooing provides a concrete example. Students can see the interconnections among folklore genres as we consider how people's beliefs and identities are expressed through the words and images with which their flesh is adorned.

We discuss ways to approach research beginning with selecting a tattoo parlor to document or interviewing peers or family about their tattoos. Making such choices suggests a direction: Is the researcher interested more in the perspective of the artist than the tattooee? I explain to my students that my initial research on text-based tattoos was with tattooees. I interviewed them about their tattoos to learn more about why they selected the words they did and why they chose words instead of images. That phase of my research provided me the tattoo images themselves as well as narratives about their significance to the tattooees. One of the complicating ideas that developed from that research was an understanding that despite my perception about tattooees intending people to read and interpret their tattoos, some of my consultants said the words were only for themselves. This shift in my perception changed my notion about the-body-as-canvas and introduced a more complex discourse of tattoos and adornment. The lines of public and private expression were blurred.

Explaining this shift in my perspective illustrates for students the way research unfolds and can change not only a researcher's original assumptions but also a researcher's approach. For a researcher, what seems to be a single shift in perspective can become still more complex. As I explain to my students, once I began thinking about the relationship between the tattooee and those who see the tattoos (or don't), my questions turned to the artist. How much is the artist involved in helping the tattooee express herself? I reflected on how carefully I had searched for an artist to create my tattoos and how concerned I had been about the collaborative nature of that process. That personal experience compelled me to incorporate research with the artists into my process.

Somewhere in the middle of the ethnographic work with these two groups lies the tattoo itself, the material object around which these various folk congregate. Considering the meaning of the tattoo, students can discuss different research strategies and the theories that can be used to analyze the tattoo. One researcher might look at symbology, combining library research with fieldwork to understand what particular images have conveyed historically and how they have been altered or appropriated. Another might interview artists about their design training and processes. Regardless, taking this approach to the research, the art can take center stage.

Discussion of the study of tattoos and tattooing provides a framework that can be applied to studies of various types of adornment. As students explore the ways in which these aesthetic choices reflect and affect cultural expression, they are exposed to the approaches folklorists use in research and can begin to develop and apply their own theories about societal attitudes based on how individuals present themselves in public.



***Martha C. Sims** teaches composition and introductory folklore at The Ohio State University and often includes elements of folklore methodology as part of the palette of research strategies that she teaches her composition students. She continues to be both fascinated and sometimes surprised by what she learns about culture from her students.*