

Field Visit and Review

Session, 2 hours

A field visit to an active, relevant, research environment makes an extremely effective teaching tool. Depending on the students' area of research, choose a specific location and identify teachable moments. In a laboratory, for example, point out safety requirements, specific techniques and how to record lab data.

The example below illustrates a visit to a Health and Demographic Surveillance Site (HDSS), a rich opportunity for research that involves clinical work, social sciences, education, town planning, governance or engineering, among others.

Watch this video to prepare for the session:



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://pressbooks.pub/cartacurricula/?p=1218#oembed-1>

Download the [curriculum](#) for these sessions.

Outcomes

By the end of the session, students can:

- Record and discuss different types of observations during a field visit (structured and unstructured).
- Choose different methods to record observational data and field notes.
- Analyse cultural awareness and the ethics of collaborating in research with study populations.

Preparation

For you, the facilitator

Organise an appropriate field visit, including all logistical arrangements. If a field visit to a community is not possible or if students are engaging virtually, organise a virtual tour to a [Health and Demographic Surveillance Site \(HDSS\)](#). You could do both, making sure that the learning from each session event is different and complementary. Share relevant preparatory questions with the students well before the visit (Step 1).

Consult these resources as you create a presentation on participant observation and field notes (Step 4):

- Kawulich, B. B. (2005). Participant observation as a data collection method. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung*, 6(2). <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-6.2.466>.
- Tessier, S. (2012). From field notes, to transcripts, to tape recordings: Evolution or combination? *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 11(4), 446–460. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691201100410>.
- Deggs, D., & Hernandez, F. (2018). Enhancing the Value of Qualitative Field Notes Through Purposeful Reflection. *The Qualitative Report*. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2018.3569>.
- Kahn, K., Tollman, S. M., Collinson, M. A., Clark, S. J., Twine, R., Clark, B. D., Garenne, M. L. (2007). Research into health, population and social transitions in rural South Africa: Data and methods of the Agincourt health and demographic surveillance system. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, 35(SUPPL. 69), 8–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14034950701505031>.
- Hinga, A. N., Molyneux, S., & Marsh, V. (2021). Towards an appropriate ethics framework for Health and Demographic Surveillance Systems (HDSS): Learning from issues faced in diverse HDSS in sub-Saharan Africa. *BMJ Global Health*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2020-004008>.
- Mbondji, P. E., Kebede, D., Soumbey-Alley, E. W., Zielinski, C., Kouvidila, W., & Lusamba-Dikassa, P. S. (2014). Health information systems in Africa: Descriptive analysis of data sources, information products and health statistics. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 107, 34–45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0141076814531750>.

Assessment

Each student submits their field notes and each group gives their PowerPoint presentation to you or a co-facilitator for assessment and feedback.

Steps

Time	Step	Who
30 minutes	1. Brief students on keeping field notes	Facilitator
1 day	2. Conduct field visit	Facilitator, students
60 minutes	3. Share field notes and experiences	Small groups, plenary
30 minutes	5. Generate a framework for field observation	Facilitator, students

Step 1. Brief students on keeping field notes

15 minutes

Present key points and then lead a discussion on what to observe and record during the field visit – and why these choices are important. Invite students' input on the elements a researcher needs to gather in order to tell a story.

For unstructured field notes, ask students to observe and record what interests them during the field trip. For structured field notes, and depending on your purpose or field, give them examples of what to look out for. You may want them to note, for instance:

- Demographics: do they see mainly old people or mainly young people?
- Indicators of wealth or poverty.
- How residents respond to having visitors looking at them.
- What infrastructure is available?
- The quality of roads or drainage.

Whatever you ask them to observe depends on what you want them to learn and remember.

Step 2. Conduct a field visit

1 day

The aim of the field visit can vary, to take advantage of ongoing research in the geographic location where you are holding the training. The field visit might:

- Illustrate how health systems function or how a health service works with others to improve access to care, or deals with the social determinants of health.
- Provide the basis for discussing and understanding the ethics of research.
- Give students insight into the logistics of how to do research, such as:
 - How long an interview takes.
 - How to ensure confidentiality.
 - How to ensure privacy.
 - How to make sure that an interviewee understands informed consent and agrees (or refuses).
 - How to ensure quality control in research data collection.

The field visit should give students practical exposure to what it really means to be in the field. You might say: "When you are asking personal questions, where and how would you conduct the interview so that the interviewee's wife or husband or child can't hear? If someone else is listening, this influences the information that they give you, which would make your research less valid."

"You get out of the classroom; you get into the field; you see the real world and you start thinking: How does my research play out in the real world situation and how does that real world situation impact on the data that I gather?"

Step 3. Share field notes and

90 minutes

In groups, students discuss their experiences and observations. They compare their field notes:

- Any challenges they encountered.
- What they observed.
- How they structured their notes.

Step 4. Generate a framework for field observation

30 minutes

Draw on the group presentations to lead discussion. Focus on:

- The importance of deciding what to observe and record.
- The elements needed to tell a story.
- The headings – who, what, where, when, why and how – that make a framework for observation and field notes.