

Hyung Sun Kim

Rhet. 105-S4

Self-reflective Essay

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Learning from mistakes

Three months have passed since I first started the ethnography project. During the three month, I have studied and researched about an aviation fraternity called Alpha Eta Rho (AHP) and participating aviation students in University of Illinois. The project opened up an opportunity to meet people whose career field is drastically different from my own. As I expected, they were not romanticists who want to fly away like some E.T. character, but determined individuals with strong willpower and firm. At least once in his or her lifetime, everyone has a dream, whether the dream turns out to be unachievable or flaccid. In order to achieve the dream, one requires firm determination that helps to surmount all the obstacles one may face in the process.

I remember with embarrassment, that in the beginning, I was clueless to how I should approach this project. I was ignorant to the fact that there are two kinds of AHP meeting: official and unofficial meeting. The official AHP meeting is held every other Thursday at 7 P.M, and unofficial meeting, called “hang-out day”, is held on Thursdays that do not have a scheduled meeting. When I attended the AHP official meeting for the first time, I was confused. Not knowing exactly what I needed to do, I did not know I needed to take notes even on tedious talks. As a result, I had really hard time writing the final paper; I had to squeeze out any possible information from my memory and the tape recorder I brought to the meeting. As it turns out, tape-recording everything at all was unintentional yet immensely fortunate move. As time passed by, I saw other students’ field notes, which included every single tiny detail. From this experience, I learned to know how to take a “good” field note. The field description I had taken previous to the spring break and after the break shows great improvement in observations. As the first two pages in the portfolio reveal, I only involved myself in

taking notes on the main topics discussed during the meeting and etching down brief description of condition of the room. But, the field site description I wrote after the spring break contains much more details in comparison. My growth as an observer is evident in the portfolio as I learned to pay attention and analyze the situation.

Starting from my first meeting, I was faced the first difficulty that made me feel distant from the aviation world. A guest speaker, who was a pilot in the navy and served as a commercial airline pilot, was invited to the meeting to share his experience in both military and commercial airlines. My ignorance in the field was notably felt as I could not understand the technological terms the guest speaker constantly used during the meeting. While club members were admiring the speed of a jet and the advanced landing system of aircrafts, I was admiring their comprehension of military aircraft(Exhibit 1).

The unofficial meeting, “hangout-day” delivered another difficulty. The unofficial meeting is usually held at a bar. At the bar, I could feel that some of the club members appreciate my presence, for I was a stranger who had been following them since the beginning of the semester. If I had introduced myself to everyone in the fraternity at the first meeting I attended, they would not have thought of me as a parasitic outsider. If I were one of them, I also probably would not have liked an Asian kid observing them and taking notes of their behaviors right in front of their face. Because of this awkwardness, I could not take notes at the bar. Instead, I observed them carefully like a detective doing a field investigation, trying to store information in my brain storage. When I attempted to take notes in the restroom, a beggar followed me into the restroom, asking for charity and robbing me of the opportunity. The next best thing I could do was to write down everything I remembered as soon as I got out of the

bar (Exhibit 2).

The interview I had with Dan Mark Skelsky, the head of AHP changed my pre-assumption that aviation students graduate with ease by just aviating aircrafts for four years. When I interviewed Dan on February 21, Dan looked a little bit tired. At first, I thought the reason he looked tired was because the interview took place, right after his last class. However, after the interview was over, I realized that his tiredness came from his tough class schedule. The aviation students have to take one aviation course per semester, and an aviation class takes nine hours per week. Because the academic credit hours they get from the classes are only three, they have 15 credit hours, meaning they are spending 21 hours for classes (Exhibit 3).

As part of this project, I did research on various subjects related to aviation. However, since I felt that many data from the research was unnecessary for writing the final paper, I included only important, relevant parts of the data. After I had received the rough draft, I had thought that I needed to revise the subjects of aviation history and the required flight hours for pilot candidates in the rough draft. However, at the last minute, I decided to discard those topics in the final paper. Although I might have found the way to include everything in appropriate context of the paper, I was pursued by the time, creating sacrifice for the greater good. If my rough draft were not a mess and I did not have to write the entire essay over again, I might have used every data I wanted to include taking time to leisure. Despite my wishes, the economy mid-term was breathing down my neck, causing me to compromise and write the paper with a huge pressure.

When I realized that I have not gone to my field-site as often as others classmates did, all I could do was to sigh deeply. When other classmates uploaded many field-site description papers after receiving their estimated grade for i-lab, all I could do

was to sit and wait for Thursday to come. As an ethnographer, I visited my field-site only once a week. I know that was not enough, but that was all I could do with the inflexible schedule of AHP meeting. Sometimes, the meeting was cancelled and I had to let a week go by worthlessly. Looking back, I realize that I could have done something else in the week, but at that time, I just slacked off. Since the meeting day and time are decidedly set, I have to adjust my schedule to the meeting. The meeting day and time often coincided with a review section held for the test on Friday, and I just had to make a choice to give up the review section. On March 2nd, there was a joint meeting between AHP and Women in Aviation, another aviation fraternity in UIUC. The day was right before the day I had a test, so I could not relax. Fortunately, the meeting was not long, but the pressure that came from the test bothered me throughout the entire meeting. Same thing occurred when I attended an unofficial meeting on March 9th. Since the purpose of unofficial meeting is to socialize with other aviation students, the meeting was much longer than an official meeting. After an hour and a half passed by, I had to leave the meeting place to study for the test on the next day.

Throughout the semester, Dan always tried his best to help me as much as possible with this project. Whenever I sent him an email, he replied within a day and if he missed my call, he never forgot to call back. If AHP meeting was held outside the Mechanical Engineering building, he always found me a ride to get there. The most memorable favor from Dan among all was the interview I had with him. At that time, he was extremely busy, and he could hardly make time for an interview. However, when he found that I had to interview him on that week, he made appointment with me at 9 P.M (His last class ended at 8:50 P.M). Without his support, I could not have continued to research aviation fraternity for a semester.

Since I transferred to International school in Korea, writing always has been a major stress in doing schoolwork. Whenever a writing assignment was given, I would say, "I'd rather study than write essays." As long as I can remember, I was never an excellent writer even in Korean school. The first big writing assignment I was given was in my freshmen year. Although, I transferred to an international school on the second semester of 8th grade, I had not written any long essay because most classes were ESL classes. The writing assignment was given in geography class, and it had to be at least five pages. I remember spending more than four days to finish it whereas my friends finished the assignment in one night. To add to the frustration, my friends got better grades than me. The discouragement from the experience is hard to express. When one of my friends who had written the essay in one night, and had gotten an A, then turned around to ask me my grade with grinning face, I almost punched him. Since writing was always one of my major concerns in high school, I was afraid of taking a rhetoric class. As I had expected, this class requires much writing, but I also learned many things from this class. First of all, I gained the confidence in writing papers. Nowadays, I'm very used to writing essays (especially in rhetoric class), and four to five pages long writing assignment do not seem that long. Although that does not indicate I have become an excellent write, my writing skill has dramatically improved since high school with the increased practice of English. Secondly, my writing speed also increased drastically. As mentioned above, I used to spend an entire week to write four to five pages long essay, but now I spend a couple days to finish it.

On the paper, *What kind of student are you?*, I stated that I would try to finish this project strong. (Exhibit 4) Even though partially, I did so in order to fill out more lines in the paper, the statement represented my wish to gain satisfaction from finishing

the project. This assignment is the longest and the largest project I had never done in my life. When I first started this project, I was not sure how this project would be at the end. Now, I know that the project did not turn out to be desirable due to the several factors gone wrong. Consequently, I could not volunteer myself to do the presentation at EOTU spring conference. I am not sure if I will take another ethnography class in the future, because I know how much efforts and time I need to spend to make a good ethnography paper. But if I do decide to take another class in the future, I will use the mistakes from this project as a mirror to reflect the progress of myself as an ethnographer.

Portfolio

Site observation 3-16-06

- The meeting was held at Mechanical Engineering Building(MEB) room 252.
- The room was in a little bit disorderly just like last meeting.
- Some tiles on the ceiling were about to fall down.
- The curtain was not shut down completely
- But the chairs were in straight line
- Janitor seemed to have cleaned the room before the meeting was started.
- The black board was clean as if it was never used before.
- There were about seven people at 7:00.
- Most of them were not new faces.
- No African American, no Asians but all Caucasians.
- Not many people were there due to spring break (some people went home early)
- The meeting started at 7:10.
- The meeting was about the bake sale on Friday at the airport.
- WIA members were cooking cookies for the bake sale on the night.
- They discussed how they are going to handle the bake sale.
- People volunteered to be there to help the bake sale.
- They decided to sell cookies and sodas together.
- The girls in WIA had told Dan, the head of AHP, that they would try make some sandwiches.
- They were deciding which person would show up at which time at the airport.
- The meeting was a short meeting (ended at 7:30)
- Nothing special or new was discussed during the meeting

Site observation 3-30-2006

- The movie night was held by AHP at Willard Airport.
- I got to the airport with my friend at 6:54 PM
- The room where movie was shown was on the second floor.
- There were total of eight people
- Laura, the head of WIA was there, instead of Dan, the head of AHP.
- The building was really old, and the building looked like a long, cylinder-shaped container box.

- The room was also old and in disorder.
- Planks are piled in places (mostly at the corner), and I had no idea what those were for.
- No smoking sign was put on the wall.
- Every desk and table appeared old, and I was not sure that a lamp on a table would work for it looked really old as well.
- A long chalkboard was on the wall.
- Old pictures in frames were on the ground.
- We sat on the sofas around the TV.
- The sofas all had different colors: green, black and purple.
- Beside the sofas, there was a microwave and a pack of popcorn on a table.
- A blue carpet surrounded by the sofas seemed clean.
- There were two movies: *4 Years old Oirgin* and *Elizabeth Town*
- People chose *Elizabeth Town* to watch.
- The television was too small and old; it was even smaller than the television I have in my room.
- In contrast, the video tape player was brand new.
- Laura made some popcorn.
- My friend who gave me a ride to the airport was really tired due to several tests he had taken this week.
- He soon fell asleep after the movie started.
- Laura and one girl stepped outside to talk in private; they seemed as if they had watched the movie before.
- One hour after the movie started, I went out of the building.
- As I got out of there, I looked around on the first floor.
- I had no idea what the building was for. It seemed not to have any classroom, and many rooms were used as storerooms.

Exhibit 1

Excerpted from Self-reflective essay 02-09-2006

The presentation lasted for about an hour, and to be honest, I felt a bit bored since I could not understand the technical terms they used constantly. It seemed that I was the only one not understanding the name of the aircrafts and technologies in aviation. However along with boredom, I also felt shame in my lack of effort to gain information about the presentation. I could have asked Dan or even the guest speakers about aviation before the presentation started. The lack of knowledge in the field was the first challenge I faced. If I knew more about the aviation, I of course would not have started this project. Despite my ignorance, I was depressed as I could sense a huge

gap between them and me.

Exhibit 2

Excerpted from self-reflective essay 03-09-2006

I had to get out of the bar a little bit earlier than others, because I had a test on the next day in the morning. During nearly two hours of observation, I could not take notes for it might make them feel unpleasant. (I would be annoyed if there's someone writing down my private life right in front of my face). In order to make up for the loss, I wrote down everything I remembered right after I got out of the door. While struggling to conjure up their conversation from memory, I realized that not being able to take a notes is another challenge that I would have to face every other week. It may be too tedious of a thing to be called a challenge but as a person of short-term memory, it is an anxious matter for now.

Exhibit 3

Excerpted from interview with Dan on 02-21-2006

To start gathering information, I emailed Dan to set up an interview. Due to Dan's busy schedule, we arranged the meeting at 9P.M at the undergraduate library, located at the midpoint between our homes. When I got there, a few minutes before the appointed time, Dan was already there, reading a newspaper. Reflecting his busyness, Dan looked a little bit tired. Dan, however, tried to be polite and greeted me.

“Okay. I don't know how to describe this. I think this is crime that aviation students have to go through. I don't know if the crime is the best word. But this is kind of unfair. This is why we are so busy. There are 120 credit hours we have to complete in order to graduate. So that basically goes down to 15 credits for each semester and each

semester you have to take a flight class. In the freshman year, you take aviation 101 and 120 and in sophomore year, you take 130 and 140. And the classes are 3 credit hour classes and you fly three times a week for two hours. So that's 6 hours of flight time you have. And you also have ground school, which means that you have an hour and half, 2 times a week. So that is total 9 hours of aviation class for a week. But you don't get any hours of flight time; the only class that gives you credit hour is the ground school. So basically, the six hours of flight time that you have to fly for a week, that counts nothing towards the credit hour. So it is 21 hours of class that you have."

Exhibit 4

Excerpted from *What kind of student are you?*

These days, I am trying my best to get a good result in Rhet. 105 class and have been trying my best; I attended every meeting that AHP held on Thursday. It was sometimes very hard for me to do so, since I often had a test or homework that is due on Friday. I am proud of what I have been doing and confident that I will be able finish the project strong.