



4 HOURS  
(2 Sessions)

# Collaborative Field Notes

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\*Adaptation Note: Field noting has been long used by researchers to collect data to produce meaning and understanding of cultural and social phenomena. This version of field note collaboration draws directly on the work of Cole (2014) and has been adapted across CU Boulder School of Education to support field based learning.

## Activity Rationale and Aims

### Aims

01.

Write field notes that capture key interactions and events as they relate to the team's research and/or design goals

02.

Share and discuss field notes to identify key themes and learnings to inform the research and/or design

### Rationale

This activity aims to support building awareness of interactions that arise in context and to facilitate informed action in our communities. Writing field notes builds awareness of conditions that bring joy and pain in an individual's context. This practice can deepen one's ability to bring intention, awareness, and compassion to themselves and others (Potvin et al., 2022). Field notes are also a tool that educators and practitioners can use to develop justice-centered practices by noticing their experiences and interactions (Cole, 1996; Gutierrez & Vossoughi, 2010; Jurow et al., 2012). Field notes can support the process of building awareness of the deficit conceptions and biases we hold, through reflection.

### Activity Summary

Field notes are detailed accounts of interactions that seek to distinguish low-inference observations and reflections of individuals' observations (Emerson et al., 1995). In this activity, collaborators will write their own field notes, which include: a) a brief summary of the interaction, b) a narrative description of the interaction, and c) reflection and analysis. Collaborators will then share and discuss their field notes.



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# In Person Steps

### 01.

Orient collaborators to the process of taking field notes.

- a. Field notes are low inference descriptions of an event and/or interaction.
  - i. Low inference notes describe what happened without drawing conclusions or making judgments.
- b. Notes include descriptions of conversations, activities and interactions, participants, physical setting, and one's own thoughts.
- c. Field notes intend to include low inference descriptions of phenomena that are directly observable. In contrast, high inference notes involve interpretations and include things that are not directly observable, such as assumptions and prescriptions of meaning. High inference notes can be included as reflections, after the narrative description.

### 02.

Review the Field Notes Template and identify the context where collaborators will take their field notes.

- a. The context should be an interaction that involves collaborators directly or that they directly witnessed.
- b. These events or experiences should focus on smaller snapshots of time (e.g., a 5-15 minute interaction).

### 03.

After taking field notes (this can happen between or during the session), work in pairs to exchange notes and discuss:

#### a. Have the author first share:

- i. What was the process of writing field notes like? Did anything feel challenging?
- ii. How easy was it for you to stay “low on the ladder of inference”?

#### b. After reading the field note and listening to the author share, the partner shares their responses to the following:

- i. How did you feel as you read?
- ii. What is there to celebrate about this set of field notes?

#### c. Invite partners to discuss:

- i. What connections did you see to [insert key constructs from your project]?
- ii. Did you find it difficult to stay low inference?

### 04.

Discuss key themes that arose with an eye towards how these insights can inform your work and learning together.

- a. To do this exercise you may find it helpful to use a shared Google Document or another collaborative tool.

## Modification Notes

- Instead of having collaborators write their field notes, they can record themselves via an audio recording.
- The field note template should be adapted to be specific to each project, particularly the prompts in the reflection and analysis portion of the template.

# Facilitator Preparation

## MATERIALS

- Computer or notepad to take field notes
- Example field notes

## HANDOUTS OR SLIDES

- [Field notes template](#)

# Facilitation Tips

- It is important that facilitators have experience with writing and using field notes.
- A useful approach is to have the group practice alongside the instructor/facilitator multiple times in advance of writing field notes independently.
- It is important to include sample notes to support learning how to do field notes.

## Example from the field

In the co-design process that informed the development of the *Cultivating Compassion and Dignity in Ourselves and Our Schools* certificate, educators wrote field notes to develop awareness and cultivation of compassion as important and necessary components of effective leadership. The success of using collaborative field noting in the co-design process led the facilitators to incorporate field noting into the courses that

comprise the certificate. Educator leaders in the courses participate in field noting as part of their summative assignments, across all three courses, writing two sets of field notes about interactions they had or witnessed that offered an opportunity for compassion. This summative assessment builds skills in writing field notes, understanding inferences, and developing awareness of pain points that arise at their schools.



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### Commitments to Equity

Collaborative field noting asks collaborators to notice their bodies, emotions, feelings, and interactions, all of which can play a role in recognizing the conditions that perpetuate inequality and oppression. The act of field noting can encourage collaborators to engage in a reflexive process that contributes to justice-centered actions. Field notes can

support the process of building awareness of the deficit conceptions and biases we hold, through reflection. Moreover, the practice of attending on purpose and without judgment to one's environment, interactions, and experiences increases awareness of self and others and supports the conditions that enable practices of care and compassion.

## Additional Reading

Potvin, A. S., Penuel, W. R., Dimidjian, S., & Jinpa, T. (under review). Supporting the development of skillful means in expressing compassion in schools through collaborative design. *Mindfulness*.

Van Steenis, E. (2021). Leveraging dilemmas as a pedagogical tool for novice youth worker learning. *Learning, Culture, and Social Interaction*, 30, 100522.

## Works Cited

Cole, M. (1996). *Cultural psychology: A once and future discipline*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (1995). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. University of Chicago Press.

Gutiérrez, K. D., & Vossoughi, S. (2010). Lifting off the ground to return anew: Mediated praxis, transformative learning, and social design experiments. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61(1-2), 100-117.

Jurow, A. S., Tracy, R., Hotchkiss, J. S., & Kirshner, B. (2012). Designing for the future: How the learning sciences can inform the trajectories of preservice teachers. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 63(2), 147-160.

Potvin, A. S., Penuel, W. R., Dimidjian, S., & Jinpa, T. (2022). Supporting the development of skillful means in expressing compassion in schools through collaborative design. *Mindfulness*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-022-01867-x>