



# VISUAL REFLECTIONS

## EXERCISE

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### **PURPOSE:**

An exercise that asks students to find examples of theoretical concepts in their environment, then use shared reflection to encourage engagement, learning, reflection and application of the concepts.

### **TOPIC:**

Reflective Practices

### **CREATED BY:**

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### **ESTIMATED LENGTH:**

80 minutes, can be shortened if the pictures are taken between class periods

### **NOTES ON THIS RESOURCE:**

This example exercise is in the context of an upper level undergraduate class on social science research methods in religious studies but is easily adaptable to other subjects.



## DESCRIPTION

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This active learning exercise was developed for an upper-level undergraduate class treating social science research methods in religious studies. It is easily adaptable to other subjects or educational contexts.

The exercise asks students to find examples of theoretical concepts in their environment, e.g., how borders or boundaries function in social worlds. They then participate in a group reflection to encourage engagement, learning, reflection, and conversation. The goal is to help them think theoretically and socially about those examples.

## INSTRUCTIONS

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Before the class, students have either read, heard a lecture, or otherwise been introduced to the theoretical concept in question. In the class where this exercise was developed, we had been reading an ethnography that considered questions of borders and boundaries in ethnographic practice.

Where do ethnographers cross borders or boundaries, or how do they identify them in other cultures? How do borders and boundaries construct the social realities in which we live?

At the beginning of the class, the instructor reminds students about the topic, perhaps inviting them to craft short phrases that capture the heart of the reading or lecture from the last class. Then, the instructor gives the purpose of the exercise: **students will test the theoretical concept by finding examples of it in their lived environment.**

In the case of borders and boundaries, I asked students to find and photograph on their cell phones examples of a border or boundaries on our campus. This could be done as a regular, out of class assignment, or as it was in our case, during class. In a regular 80-minute class session, students had 30 minutes to find an example, take a picture, and then email that picture to the instructor.

When students return to class, the instructor goes through the images, projecting them so everyone can see them, and asking the photographer to comment on why he or she chose the image. The instructor then asks other students for questions of curiosity directed to the photographer.

The borders and boundaries exercise elicited examples of beat up Hondas next to Maseratis, sorority row on campus, our engineering building shot in a way that it looked like a fortress, and a campus police vehicle. Looking at the photographs together, students were able to identify many of the social borders that make up their shared campus world, and also understand that they experienced many of those borders very differently from one another.



To end the exercise, the instructor should then invite a reflection on the reading or lecture topic in light of the images students brought in. Does the way an author presents borders seem more logical or less so? Does this change the way students are thinking about the theory in question?

## ADAPTATIONS

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In the field of religious studies, it might be interesting to have students photograph something they think of as “religious” in order to spark a discussion about the definition of religion, or “cultural” for a cultural anthropology class.

No matter what the subject, it is imperative to ask students to reflect on how the photographs and the experience of taking, sharing, and thinking about them impacts their understanding of the core subject matter.