

Article

The Merits of Using "EthnoQuest" as an English Language Learning Tool and a Medium of Cultural Transmission

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Abstract

This paper will focus on the experience of using the game 'EthnoQuest' as part of a content-based course at a small private university in Japan. 'EthnoQuest' is *an interactive multimedia simulation for cultural anthropology fieldwork*, and students enter the virtual environs of *Amopan*, a small Mexican village. The game is text based and two-dimensional and by comparison does not have any of the high quality graphics or adventure stimulating challenges of a commercial game. Nevertheless, I felt it was extremely beneficial to students taking ethnographic fieldwork courses as it opened up the field in a very accessible way. Two groups of students will be discussed; one group of students had very limited abilities in English and were very conscious of this fact. The second group, had advanced English skills and were able to use the simulations as a stepping stone to fruitful discussions about topics such as bilingualism and cultural and religious beliefs. Students with lower levels of English were able to interact with villagers at their own pace creating a comfortable and safe study environment from which to improve their English skills and enhance their knowledge of a different culture. Four simulations from the game will be analysed for their language building skills and cultural content. Finally, student feedback and problems with the software will be discussed.

Key words: EthnoQuest, cultural anthropology, simulations, ethnographic fieldwork.

1. Introduction

This paper will focus on the merits of using an interactive simulation designed for students of cultural anthropology as a tool to improve English language learning at university level as well as being a method of introducing students to a different culture. The simulation used in this research was "EthnoQuest" by Frances F. Berdan, Edward A. Stark, and Carey Van Loon. The simulation takes us on a journey to the fictional village of *Amopan*, which is located in the highlands of eastern Mexico. Although *Amopan* is fictional, it is modelled on actual villages in eastern Mexico and each simulation is designed to give the student a sense of what it is like to conduct fieldwork. Interaction with the inhabitants of *Amopan* is text based and two-dimensional. The player has to respond to the villagers' dialogue by choosing from a number of options. If the student answers correctly they are free to carry on, if they choose incorrectly they are given an explanation of why they have made a mistake and asked to choose again. The design of the simulation is not to teach students English; nevertheless, I found it extremely useful as a method of English language teaching for students participating in an ethnographic fieldwork course whose native language was not English.

For the purposes of this paper I would like to concentrate on two groups of students who studied ethnographic fieldwork at a small private university in Japan. Both groups of students were small, averaging six or seven students who attended classes on a regular basis. The first group of students were taking an elective intensive course over

ten days and were expected to be in the classroom for six hours per day. The second group of students were taking a normal elective class of four credits —three hours per week— spread out over a fifteen-week semester. The first group of students —Group A— were final year students, and had an English ability on the cusp of upper beginner to lower intermediate level, and were very self-conscious of this fact. The second group of students —Group B— were second and third year students and with English abilities ranging from upper intermediate to advanced.

Group A did not have their own copy of the simulations; instead we all played the game together in class using a large screen. For each simulation one student was chosen to be the virtual ethnographer and the student's classmates were instructed to give advice and help. Group B had their own copy of the simulations and apart from the first and last simulation were expected to work on each simulation during allotted class time or as required homework. This paper will analyse how *EthnoQuest* was used and adapted to improve student's English ability within the confines of a 'content' course curriculum.

2. Setting the scene

The university that the above groups of students attended was a small private university in the Tokyo metropolitan area, which had recently introduced a new department of global studies, incorporating an ambitious all English language immersion programme, where, in addition to academic language instruction, all other classes in anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and international relations to name but a few, were conducted in English. Furthermore, initially, all administration staff the students came into contact with spoke only English and so students were expected to carry out all aspects of university life in English. Thus, by creating a mini-English language environment, it was thought that the university would be able to produce graduates with extremely high competence levels in English and subsequently aide Japan's efforts to globalise its education system. For further discussion about Japan's attempts to internationalise and globalise its system of higher education see Burgess, Gibson, Klaphake, and Selzer (2010); Ishikawa 2011, Goodman (2007), and MacLellan, P (2009).

The reality of such an enterprising project was that the student's level of English at entrance level was lower than expected and the vast majority of students were unable to adequately digest information in core and elective content courses. Japan is an aging society and small private universities are struggling to find enough students and so the age of accepting all students *zen'nyu jidai* who apply to university is slowly being ushered in (Poole, 2010). Additionally, the prevailing numbers of students applying to the university were monolingual Japanese with very little exposure to English language other than the compulsory English classes taken at junior and high school. The academic English programme established at the university (initially one year of intense academic English which was re-developed to create a two year programme), supported students as much as possible, and in some areas proved to be successful, but for some students the gap between the expectations of the 'content' courses and the reality of the students' linguistic skills could not be bridged.

I felt that using 'EthnoQuest' was one step in the right direction to narrow this gap and pave the way for combining elements of English language teaching with cultural exploration. Brigitte Holm Sørensen and Bente Meyer (2007: 599) define serious games as "digital games and equipment with an agenda of educational design and beyond entertainment." 'EthnoQuest' falls into this category and when it was first introduced to both groups of students, the initial response was one of disappointment because the students automatically assumed when they heard the word 'game' that 'EthnoQuest' would be a commercial game; the type they are used to playing in their leisure time. Unlike students in Hong Kong (Chik 2011), who have the opportunity to play digital games in English or Japanese, and therefore to a certain extent improve their knowledge of both languages, Japanese students have an abundant range of games

available to them in Japanese, thus limiting opportunities of English language learning even in their free time.

This initial disappointment notwithstanding, 'EthnoQuest' covers many of the concepts central to Serious Games as set out by Sørensen and Meyer (2007: 563). It provides a challenging environment for students with problems that they have to solve; students' achievements are acknowledged and praised from the inhabitants of *Amopan*, from the wise man who guides the student throughout the simulations, and from the fictional Society of Creative Research to whom you must send your reports to after every simulation. Furthermore, it allows students to explore the culture and environment of *Amopan* and then to reflect on one's findings. Students also have a chance to socialise, albeit with fictional characters, in a foreign language and simultaneously to learn about that culture and society. As an educator at university, I appreciated the fact that 'EthnoQuest' had a very academic setting and praise came from the fictional sponsors of the student's research. The virtual praise in conjunction with my own praise gave the students an additional sense of wellbeing and contributed to the creation of a safe learning environment from which students were able to muster enough confidence to communicate in English without fear of appearing foolish in front of their instructor, and or their peers and as Kang (2005) espouses the willingness to communicate plays a pivotal role in increasing competency levels in second language acquisition.

3. The Simulations

In total there are ten simulations, which depict various aspects of the lives of the inhabitants of *Amopan* and situations you may find yourself in as a researcher conducting fieldwork. These simulations, in order are: 1. *Getting There*, 2. *First Encounters*, 3. *Who's Who in Amopan?*, 4. *Working in the Fields*, 5. *Marketday*, 6. *The Day of the Dead*, 7. *A Day in the Life of the Midwife*, 8. *The Local Elections*, 9. *A Feud Escalates*, 10. *Telling Tales*, and *Going Home* (for a brief description of each simulation see Appendix A.).



Figure 1. *EthnoQuest* entry page.

All ten simulations in 'EthnoQuest' were beneficial to the students' knowledge of English and cultural anthropology, however, discussing all ten would be impractical and so I have chosen four quite distinct simulations for detailed analysis in this paper, namely; *Getting There*, *Who's Who in Amopan?*, *A Day in the Life of the Midwife*, and *Telling tales, and Going Home*. The first simulation *Getting There* is crucial to the student's understanding of the game and therefore students from both groups were guided step by step through each section. The layout of each simulation is self-explanatory and follows the same pattern; therefore even students who were novices at gaming could easily understand what was happening and the problems encountered by Peterson (2011: 63-64) did not occur.

The third simulation, *Who's Who in Amopan?*, is one of the longer and more challenging simulations. Students are expected to create a census of the inhabitants of *Amopan*, reproduce it in table format and create a map of *Amopan*. During this simulation individual characters of *Amopan* residents come to the fore and it is at this point that students began to like or feel nervous around certain inhabitants they came into contact with. The seventh simulation *A Day in the Life of the Midwife* is a very interesting exercise in interview techniques and the formulation of questions in English. One continual pattern I have encountered in Japan is the difficulty Japanese students have in asking questions in English. Even my more advanced students found structuring questions in English a difficult task. Interviewing the midwife in *Amopan* enabled students to ask a number of pertinent questions in varying formats. The final simulation *Telling tales, and Going Home* is discussed here as a method of cross-cultural interpretations of folktales between the inhabitants of *Amopan*, European folktales and Japanese ones.

3.1. *Getting There*

The simulation *Getting There* gently eases students into the structure of the game and preparations for their year abroad in the virtual world of *Amopan*. At the beginning of each simulation students are expected to read their virtual diary, the journal abstracts are usually fairly short and the language is a mixture of slang (mainly British slang although the text book is aimed at students in the USA), and casual conversational English. In writing classes I have often tried to persuade students to start their own English language journal as one method of gathering thoughts and getting used to writing in English. I have tried various techniques such as structured journal writing in class and unstructured writing at home but have always found that at some point students become tired of writing their journal and eventually I receive at best half-hearted attempts, or at worst no writings at all. The brevity of the journal extracts demonstrated to students that journal writings do not have to be excessively long writing exercises. Furthermore, the content of the journal extracts were never too serious, helping students to understand that journal writing can be fun; for example, one extract stated:

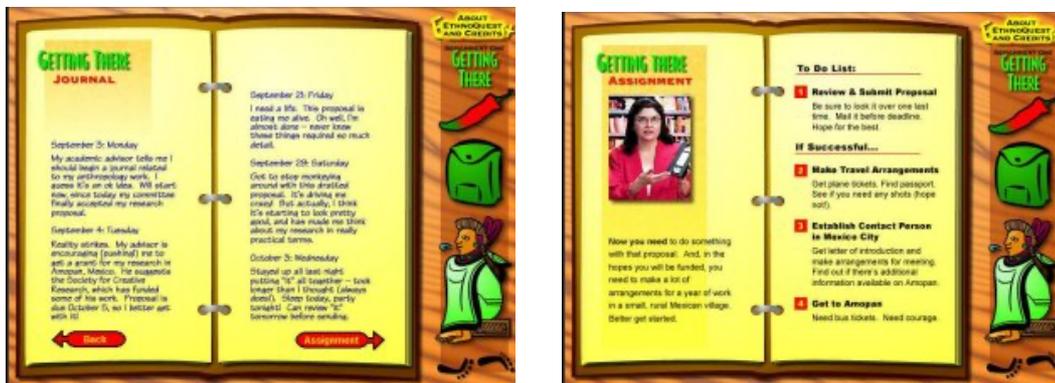
"Stayed up all last night putting 'it' [the report] all together—took longer than I thought (always does!). Sleep today, party tonight! Can review it tomorrow before sending!"

Students in both groups had never seen this kind of journal writing prior to using 'EthnoQuest' and as a result felt more relaxed about their own journal writing. Moreover, I explained to students in both groups that their journal was confidential and although I would ask to look at it from time to time no one else would be privy to their thoughts.

Because students in Group A were taking an intensive course, I expected them to write their journals in class for the last twenty to thirty minutes of the day. Students were able to use this time to *wind* down from six solid hours of study as well as give them the opportunity to collect their thoughts and prepare for the next day of intensive study. Group B students were expected to write their journals at home rather than in class. Obviously, I had more success for students from Group A as their journal writings were

an in-class activity, students from group B kept their journal writings throughout the semester, although admittedly not on a regular basis and often only after gentle prodding.

After reading the journal extracts students are then told of their assignments for that particular simulation (See Appendix B for examples of 'to do' lists in *Amopan*). In the first simulation there is a lot of preliminary work, which has to be done before heading off to immerse yourself into village life. Once the letter of approval has arrived from the *Society of Creative Research* a letter from Dr. Elisa Sabia, who is your contact in Mexico City, will arrive. After receiving this letter you are then assigned your first real interactive task —that of packing your suitcase. In order to pack your suitcase students must drag an item from a list of words into the suitcase, if the item is suitable for the trip then it remains in the suitcase if it is not then it bounces back and the wise man tells you to try again. For students of lower levels of English this was particularly useful for expanding or re-introducing the names of common items in English. For example, words such as *raincoat*, *hair dryer*, *cellular phone*, *novel*, *family photos*, *formal clothes* and *dictionary*.

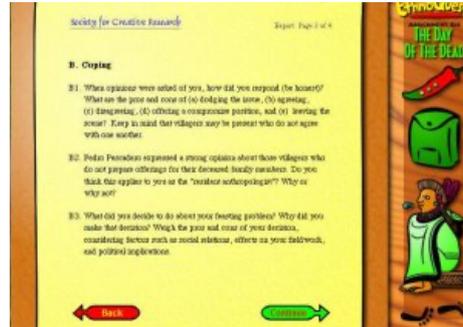
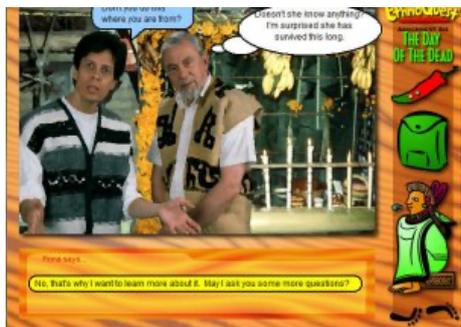
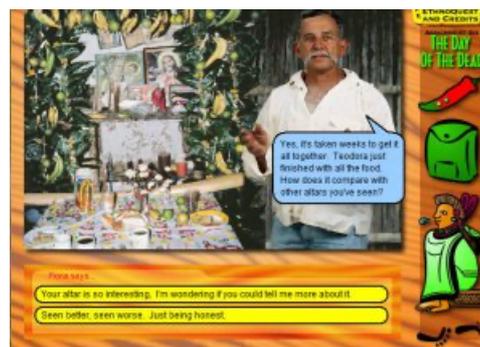


Figures 2 and 3. Sample "Journal" and "Assignment" from the simulation *Getting There*.

In feedback from his study of Japanese learners using massively, multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), Peterson (2011: 69) found that participants in his research project with advanced and intermediate language skills were positive about learning previously unknown vocabulary such as "*whispers, cheers, spell, interrupted, village, quest and damn.*" Likewise, students from Group A learnt many new words from using *Amopan*, and the above example of packing a suitcase was of particular significance because some students in this group became very animated at not being allowed to take such items as a hairdryer or a mobile phone. In fact, one of the students from Group A, who was very self-conscious of her English ability became so indignant at not being able to take these items that unconsciously she began to express herself in English without hesitation.

At the end of each simulation the student is then asked a series of questions by the wise man, if the student has made sufficient observations then answering the questions is relatively straightforward but if the student has not made detailed field notes then they will have to start the simulation over again. This is the part of the game students from both groups found the most challenging. The textbook which accompanies the DVDs does not give the questions the wise man will ask; it only allows space for the answers (See Appendix C for samples of questions). The English ability of students in Group A was too low to expect them to make detailed comprehensive notes in English and play the game at the same time.

For these students I approached this part of the game in a structured step-by-step fashion. De Haan (2011: 46) quotes Hubbard (1991: 222) and says that it is easy to “blindly accept something as valuable for language learning simply because it involves language and problem solving and students enjoy it.” I was particularly conscious of this when attempting to engage students from Group A in simple discussions about the questions at the end of each simulation. For example I often adapted the language from the original questions to a simplified version, which was more suitable for the students' level of English. Students in Group B, were better equipped to deal with this part of the simulation and little adaptation was necessary, however, instructions on how to make detailed notes were given and reemphasised each week. Students in Group B welcomed this instruction and said it helped them in their other English content-based classes where note-taking was an essential part of the lecture.



Figures 4, 5, 6 and 7. Sample assignments.

3.2. Who's Who in Amopan?

The simulation, *Who's Who in Amopan?*, proved to be both challenging and rewarding for students regardless of their language ability. Challenging because of the sheer amount of work and length of the simulation and rewarding because of the amount of work achieved when it was completed. Once again, students followed the same format of reading the journal and looking at the 'To Do' list. During this simulation the student is required to visit a number of households and ask a number of questions in order to create a census.

Students were expected to find out who the head of the household was in each family in *Amopan*. In Japan the family system is a complex structure of relationships with a head of the household which is registered at the local city hall—for further information of the family system in Japan see Hendry (2006), and Hunter (1989). Japanese students from both groups were able to take the vocabulary from the game related to the structure of the family system in Japan and adapt it to talk about their own

individual family structures. For Group A this meant expressing the structure of the family system in relation to themselves and students from Group B were able to take this one step further and compare and contrast the family system in *Amopan* with that of Japan. I came across a similar situation with the students when we were studying the simulation *The day of The Dead*, which is essentially about a festival to honour the Dead. In Japan families who remember deceased relatives often have alters in their house, and my students were able to compare the alters the residents of *Amopan* had made and decorated with those in their own household or in a relative's household. Festivals, such as the Bon festival is a time in Japan when Japanese people return to their home towns to visit the families of their ancestors and so students were able to make connections between the customs and religious practices of people in *Amopan* and their own. Paul Gee (2005) maintains that good digital games allow the player to inhabit the life of the virtual character and so the goals in the game become the goals of the player playing the game; simultaneously, the virtual character can represent the goals and desires of the real world player. I cannot categorically state that my students had the same goals and desires as the characters in *Amopan* or that the characters in *Amopan* represented my students' desires, however, cultural similarities between the virtual world and the real world bonded the students to the virtual characters, which sustained an interest in the game even during the toughest simulations.

One of the questions in the census was related to the language the residents of *Amopan* spoke, the residents were asked if they spoke Spanish or Nahuatl (the native language of the residents of *Amopan*). Even though the game is in English and is targeted at English speakers the virtual ethnographer is fluent in Spanish and interacts with the residents of *Amopan* in Spanish and also learns Nahuatl. There is a glossary of Nahuatl terms in the textbooks and also in the virtual rucksack. Students have a chance to listen and practice various words or phrases in the Nahuatl language. The fact that the natives of *Amopan* did not place English anywhere on their linguistic map —Spanish was the lingua franca— helped my students understand that in addition to English there are other languages, which are worthy of study. Many of the residents of *Amopan* could speak both Spanish and Nahuatl and this led to a discussion amongst my Group B students about bilingualism in Japan.

3.3. A Day in the Life of the Midwife

The simulation, *A Day in the Life of the Midwife*, is in many respects more intimate than other simulations in that the virtual ethnographer mainly interacts with Teodore the midwife, rather than with many different characters. This creates a more intense atmosphere and challenges students' English ability because there is less action and more dialogue. Nevertheless, as mentioned previously this simulation is a great opportunity for students to really understand how to formulate questions, use follow-up questions and conduct an interview. The topics covered in the questions range from asking about Teodore's own children, her work experience and the role of a midwife (See Appendix D for sample questions). During the course of the interview Teodore is interrupted a few times and conversations have to be brought back on track.

At the end of this simulation students were asked to analyse the type of questions they asked and correct the 'questionable' questions which fell into the following ten categories; *showing disgust surprise or other strong emotions, phrasing a question as a statement, making assumptions, exhibiting cultural bias, failing to clarify vague terms, assuming you know a term, asking questions Teodore doesn't understand, offering opinions, completing Teodore's sentences, asking leading questions such as "Don't you think that?"* This was an extremely challenging task for Group A students, and had to be broken down and explained in modified English for them to understand and even then it stretched the limits of their English ability. Group B also struggled with this exercise as they were used to a more language textbook approach to constructing and deconstructing questions rather than the anthropological approach.

3.4. Telling Tales and Going Home

As mentioned previously, the final simulation, gives students valuable insight into the folklore and beliefs of the villagers of *Amopan* and also teaches them stories of classical western folk tales. Prior to completing the simulations students from both groups were asked to read in English a western classical folktale such as Cinderella, Snow White or Little Red Riding Hood and then compare them with English versions of Japanese classical stories such as Peach Boy (*Momotaro*), Golden Boy (*Kintaro*), or *Princess Kaguya* (*Kaguya-hime*). After students have completed these tasks they then enter the final simulation and listen to the stories told by Luis, Pedro and Roberto. You are then invited to tell the villagers versions of Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Robin Hood, Cinderella, Jack and the Beanstalk, and Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. As you are telling the stories the villagers constantly interrupt adding their own meanings and interpretations. For example, the villagers berate Little Red Riding Hood's parents for allowing her to travel into the woods alone as everyone knows that the woods are too dangerous for small children. The dwarves in Snow White are spirits of the forest who have great wealth and would gladly swap Snow White but only at a price. The villagers had great sympathy for Robin Hood and his men as they too have to pay taxes and they understand the hardship paying taxes can sometimes bring.

This exercise challenged the students in that the villagers all gave their comments at the same time and students had to increase their speed reading skills in order to respond quickly to what was expected of them. Furthermore, students from Group B, were able to analyse the different stories and interpretations of the western stories and then add their own interpretations and comparisons to Japanese fairy tales.

4. Dr. Bronislaw Edmund Radcliffe-Pritchard

Throughout the game, students must listen to and watch video tapes of a previous anthropologist who visited the village of *Amopan* in 1965, and who goes by the name of Dr. Bronislaw Edmund Radcliffe-Pritchard. Radcliffe-Pritchard during the course of his field research in *Amopan* made a series of videotapes, which students can access and review during the course of each simulation. The videotapes are deliberately grainy in order to give the students a sense that these were made a long time ago. Students from both groups felt this was the most challenging part of the game and we had to spend extra time on each of the videotapes.



Figure 8. Sample assignment from one of the deliberately grainy videotapes.

Fortunately, the script is also available to students so they can listen and read at the same time. I adapted the videotapes into listening exercises so that students were better able to understand what was being said. One of the main difficulties that the students faced was not only the speed of the tapes but also the type of language used. Radcliffe-Pritchard comes from Yorkshire in England and although his accent is not overtly strong he uses specifically British phrases or idioms that my students were just not able to grasp.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, the experience of using this simulation field guide, I felt, was very positive in that it deposited students into a virtual world entirely in English and encouraged them to complete various tasks and challenges, which differ from the traditional classroom setting. Students from Group A, who had lower levels of English, could not fully utilize the game as a stepping stone for further discussion about anthropological topics. Nevertheless, they were able to interact with the villagers and see another culture, which is very different from their own. Ultimately, student feedback from this group was very positive as they felt that not only had they improved their English language skills but also gained knowledge about the 'content' aspect of the course in a fun and informative way.

Feedback from Group B, was not as positive. The main problem student's had with the game in this group was that they felt having their own copy of the game limited interpersonal skills with their classmates, especially if time was given over to the simulation during class time. After discussing what to do, we decided to work through some of the simulations together as a group, and this worked much better as the students really enjoyed interacting together with the characters of *Amopan* rather than on their own. Once this new method was established, students from Group B really became more animated about playing the game and were more willing to play the game as part of their homework assignments.

Technical problems with the game were frustrating at times, for example there is an option to save the simulation as you are working on it but this option didn't seem to work so if you stopped a simulation half way through, you had to start from the beginning and repeat the simulation over again. Sometimes the game froze if you used it for prolonged periods of time and had to be ejected and the simulations started again. These problems notwithstanding, 'EthnoQuest' was a real boost to my anthropology courses, and provided students with a means to bridge the gap between content and language.

Appendix A.

The Simulations of *EthnoQuest*

- *Getting There*: You make preparations for your fieldwork, including obtaining a grant, packing wisely, and gaining contacts and prior information.
- *First Encounters*: You establish rapport with the villagers, find a place to stay, and learn some basic information about the village and its inhabitants.
- *Who's Who in Amopan?*: You are introduced to the villagers and their roles as you make a census and update a village map.
- *Working in the Fields*: You learn about the importance of land, rituals associated with farming, concepts of time, and food categories.
- *Marketday*: In Amopan's weekly market you map out the selling arrangements, figure out the rules of marketing, and purchase some products.
- *Day of the Dead*: You collect ritual and social data on this important domestic ritual, learn about villagers' economic investment in ritual, and gain insights into relationships between the living and the dead in this culture.

- *A Day in the Life of the Midwife* : You interview this key villager, learning about her life history and important skills and role in the village.
- *The local Elections*: You comprehend local political and social tensions as you become entangled in political factions and villagers' special interests.
- *A Feud Escalates*: You are enmeshed in a dispute that derives from volatile village relations with ranchers and others outside the village. It throws the village out of balance, which is somewhat restored by the Patron Saint's fiesta.
- *Telling Tales, Going Home*: You have an opportunity to delve more deeply into beliefs and worldview of the people of Amopan, and you must cope with leaving.

Appendix B. Examples of Assignments

Getting There. Assignment

Now you need to do something with that proposal. And, in the hopes you will be funded, you need to make a lot of arrangements for a year of work in a small, rural Mexican village. Better get started.

To Do List

- Review & Submit Proposal

Be sure to look it over one last time. Mail it before the deadline. Hope for the best.

If Successful...

- Make Travel Arrangements

Get plane tickets. Find passport. See if you need any shots (hope not!)

- Establish Contact person in Mexico City

Get letter of introduction and make arrangements for meeting. Find out if there's additional information available on Amopan.

- Get to Amopan

Need bus tickets. Need courage.

Appendix C. Questions from the Wise Man.

Who's Who in Amopan? Assignment

You are now prepared to solicit census information from the villagers of Amopan, and have a census form to complete. You will also be creating a current map of Amopan using Radcliffe-Pritchard's 1965 map as a basis for your new map.

To Do List

- Take a Census

Interview villagers who live in central Amopan to identify them by residence, name, age, gender, marital status, occupation, language, and relationships to others.

- Make a Map

Update Radcliffe-Pritchard's 1965 map of the central part of Amopan by locating buildings, roads and other current village features. Identify these cultural and natural features as specifically as possible.

Appendix D: Sample Questions from the *Wise Man: Getting there.*

1. How long will you be in Amopan? (hint look at the filed documents in your knapsack)
2. What is your total budget?
3. How long did it take to get your proposal approved?
4. Why do you think it took so long?
5. What is the exchange rate?
6. What direction from Mexico City is Amopan?
7. What do you know about Bronislaw Edmund Radcliffe-Pritchard?
8. What was a major problem Radcliffe-Pritchard encountered in Amopan?
9. Why is it a good idea to have a contact (Professora Sabia) at the University in Mexico?
10. Why is it a good idea to have a letter of introduction from the president of the municipio?
11. What kinds of preparations did you make? Why were they important?

Appendix E: Sample of Questions and follow up questions asked to the Midwife.

- Main Question: How many children do you have?
 - Follow up Questions: So you gave birth to six children?, How old are they?, Do they all live here with you?
- Main Question: Did another midwife help you deliver them?
 - Follow up questions: What was your mother's name?, What made her the best midwife here?, Did you help her when you were a child?, Could you tell me how long you have been a midwife?
- Main Question: Do you remember when you delivered your first baby?
- Main Question: Do you remember how old you were at the time?
- Main Question: How did you learn the skills to become a midwife?
 - Follow up questions: How long did it take you to learn everything?, How did she teach you?, It must have been a lot of work to have learned so much.
- Main Question: Could you tell me why you decide to become a midwife?
- Main Question: Are you the only midwife in Amopan?
 - Follow up question: Does it keep you very busy?
- Main Question: Can you describe what you do as a midwife?
 - Follow up questions: Do you help women prior to their giving birth?, How do you help them prior to their giving birth?, How do you help them during childbirth?, Do you continue to help women after she gives birth?

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