FORENSIC GEOLOGY - OBSERVATION

For the first class meeting of my Forensic Geology course I do several activities that are designed to point out the differences between eye-witness accounts and scientific observation.

I. Classroom scuffle -

Several students (actors) enter the classroom in a combative mode. One is usually chasing the other and both have some sort of weapon (typically a plastic knife and a rock hammer). I limit the observation time to 10 to 15 seconds and the actors then exit the room. Students in the class are asked to write down what they saw and to give as many details as possible. After the students have written down their observations the actors re-enter the room and the students can see how close their observations came to the real people. This exercise can have all levels of difficulty. The most difficult level is to have two actors of the same sex and roughly the same body type with similar dress (either dark or light clothes). The least difficult level is to have one actor of each sex with one wearing light clothing and the other wearing dark clothing. Its also interesting to look at sex bias, i.e. if the actors are male, do female or male students give better descriptions and vice-versa. What I often find is that students are better at describing the attributes of a member of the opposite sex.

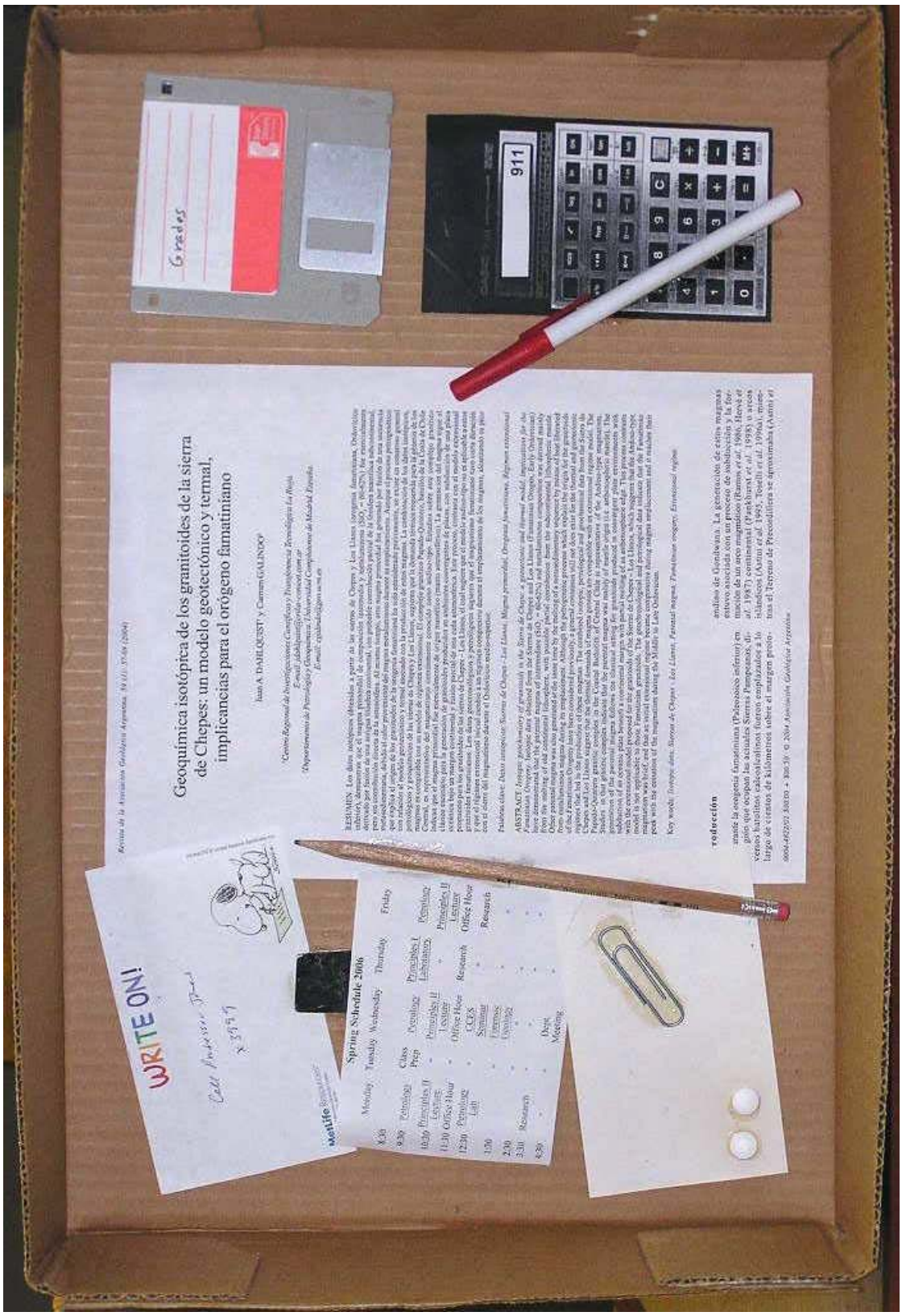
II. Office observation -

I have the students visit my office, a very information rich environment, and give them 5 minutes to make observations in the office. They are then asked to tell me about myself based on what they've seen. This is an interesting exercise because each student sees different things, probably based on their own life experience.

III. The desktop -

This is an exercise suggested by Steve Peters at Lehigh University. A variety of items are glued to a cardboard box lid and are intended to represent someone's desk top. Students are given a minute to examine the box lid (they work in groups of two and I have multiple box lids with the same configuration). They are then asked to write down their observations. The box lids are returned so they can check their observations with what actually exists. They are then asked to determine the order in which the items were placed on the desk top (a sequence of events exercise). A picture of the box lid (desk top) that I use in my course is shown on the next page.

I find that these exercises are a good way to "break-the-ice" in the class and are a way to address issues of observation, measurement, and inference. The students generally do reasonably well with these exercises, in fact better than I had anticipated when I introduced them into the course.



Box lid desktop