



Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence Professional Paper

Ethnographic Research

Observations from Different Perspectives

“One’s mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions.”

~ often attributed to Oliver Wendell Holmes

ETHNOGRAPHY IS...

David Fetterman defines ethnography “as the art and science of describing a group or culture” (1998, p. 11). It relies heavily on up-close, personal experiences and participation by the researcher. The goal of ethnographic research is to understand another way of life from the native point of view (Spradley, 1979). It typically employs three kinds of data collection: observations, interviews and documents. Hammersley (1990) points out that ethnography should have most of the following five features:

1. People’s behavior is studied in everyday contexts, rather than under experimental conditions created by the researcher.
2. Data are gathered from a range of sources, but observations and informal conversations are usually the main ones.
3. The approach to data collection is “unstructured” in the sense that it does not involve following through a detailed plan set up at the beginning.
4. The focus is usually a single setting or group of relatively small scale.
5. The analysis of the data involves interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions and mainly takes the form of verbal descriptions and explanations.

Ethnography is basically the approach we all use in everyday life to make sense of our surroundings.

ETHNOGRAPHY IN THE CLASSROOM

If we look at a classroom from an ethnographic perspective, we see that cultures are being constructed on a daily basis. The kind of culture that is formed in the classroom determines the kind of learning that takes place. Students and teachers create patterns over time in the way they interact, understand, and believe. Sometimes these patterns become “invisible” because they become ordinary and routine. Ethnography can be used to make these patterns visible and allow a look at what students and teachers are doing and learning in classrooms.

Events are different in every classroom because teachers and students are different, establishing and creating their own rights and obligations, roles and relationships, and norms and expectations (Green & Dixon, 1993). The ethnographer looks at classrooms from the perspectives of both the teacher and student and understands how complicated the social interactions are and how different one classroom is from another. Using ethnography as a method for looking at classrooms, teachers can understand that what might be common in one classroom is not common in another.

DATA COLLECTION IN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Observations

Observing is a basic human activity. Throughout life, we observe in order to learn and participate in our world. In the foreword to Carolyn Frank’s book,

Ethnographic Eyes: A Teacher's Guide to Classroom Observations, Judith Green and Carol Dixon state, "...our individual lenses influence what we see, what we interpret, what we come to understand and how our observations may differ from those of others" (1999, p. ix). We need to be aware of what lenses we are using to see life and develop a language of teaching and learning and always be looking for new ways of seeing and understanding.

Observation in the Classroom

According to Hammersly (1990), observations and informal conversations are the main source of data in ethnographic research. The observers, or ethnographers, record and analyze the kind of classroom culture that is being created by listening carefully to what members in the class are saying and by observing their behavior. The most difficult part of observing is to remain objective and record the events as they actually are and not interpret, evaluate or jump to conclusions. We need to hold off on prejudging and realize that events can be seen from many different perspectives. Students, teachers, and ethnographers all see classrooms from different views. Our schools are very diverse. Classrooms have to work together as a community and be aware of the diversities and how these differences can be a resource for classroom development. This is where ethnography can be a valuable tool in helping teachers adjust their instruction to involve all students and incorporate their cultures.

Field Notes

Keeping field notes is a good way to keep track of what is happening in the classroom. As an ethnographic tool to help teachers observe in classrooms, Frank (1999, p. 9) suggests an activity she calls "Notetaking/Notemaking". This is an ethnographic frame that helps teachers understand the differences between their own personal perspectives and the perspectives of an ethnographic researcher. The activity involves drawing a line down the middle of a paper to make a T-chart. The left side of the chart should be labeled *notetaking*; the right side should be labeled *notemaking*. On the notetaking side, the teacher keeps descriptive field notes (what is actually happening in the classroom and the conversations that are occurring). On the notemaking side, the observer records his interpretations or questions

concerning the activities that are being observed. This ethnographic frame helps the observer see what is happening from a nonjudgmental, unbiased perspective. The intent of the notes is to generate more questions that require interviews or more observations in order to broaden understanding about the classroom.

Observations Outside the Classroom

Just as observations in the classroom are vital to research, so are observations outside the classroom. This involves collecting information on families, neighborhoods, languages, experiences, friends and peers. Observing details in the classroom and at the same time looking at the broader picture, such as information from the neighborhood, gives teachers a more complete picture of their students. By learning about others' experiences, we provide a resource for newer and better understanding of ourselves and each other. We also gain an increased understanding of our students' lives and cultures. Teachers can also see the "differences between the academic expectations that can be supported in home environments and the expectations that put roadblocks up for students" (Frank, p. 25). In some homes for example, you may find there are socio/economic forces at play that cause counter productive environmental conditions that block the learning experience (e.g., single parent homes, drugs, crime). This kind of knowledge allows the teacher to make informed adjustments that can make instruction appropriate and meaningful.

Interviews

Interviews provide an additional avenue for data collection. Usually, the ethnographer will focus on a community, in this case, a classroom. Informants (students and teachers) are selected as those having overall knowledge of the activities of the class. These informants are asked to identify other informants so as to allow the ethnographer the opportunity to gather more data and explore in depth the culture of the classroom. In an ethnographic interview, the ethnographer conducts the interview in order to learn something, not in order to explain something. This type of interview helps teachers gain information from students and parents to help them become more effective teachers. Agar (1980) explains the ethnographic interview as:

...informal because you are not taking on the formal role of interrogator. The ethnographer doesn't know enough to ask the appropriate specific questions. In this "early dance" the informant takes the lead. The ethnographer's role is to look interested and suggest a couple of turns toward the other side of the ballroom so that he can check the view from there. (p. 90)

By letting go of the need to control the interview, the ethnographer hands over the discussion to the informant and in doing so learns how the informant is thinking about his world from his point of view.

There is no one right way to conduct interviews. However, Genzuk (2003) lists several guidelines for effective interviewing:

1. Ask open-ended, clear questions using understandable and appropriate language.
2. Use probes and follow-up questions to solicit depth and detail.
3. Listen attentively and respond appropriately to let the person know he or she is being heard.
4. Observe while interviewing. Be aware of and sensitive to how the person is affected by and responds to different questions.
5. Tape record whenever possible to capture full and exact quotations for analysis and reporting.

Recordings and Other Artifacts

It is very easy to get caught up in the everyday life of the classroom and miss what is really happening. If we can stop the action by using recordings or videos, we can analyze the events and look at what is happening from a different perspective. This enables the teacher to adjust instruction.

Ethnographers might also make use of documents to help them answer some of their questions. Some possible documents might include: school records, correspondence, memos, court records, curriculum, budgets, etc. Having these documents available before observations and interviews can be helpful to the ethnographer to focus observations and the types of questions to ask when interviewing.

REFLECTION

Taking time to reflect, whether in writing or in conversation, is an important part of research. Reflective practice enables teachers to become better problem solvers. They use reflection to adjust their practice. According to Frank, reflections can be used for many purposes: 1) to change what is not working, 2) to think through actions, 3) to relieve frustration, 4) to connect the theories of learning with the practice of instruction, and 5) to examine teaching expertise. Our reflections allow us to constantly learn from new situations.

ANALYSIS

In analyzing and reporting findings, the researcher is the detective looking for trends and patterns (Krueger, 1994). Analysis involves bringing order to the data. Interpretation of the data involves attaching meaning and significance to the analysis. When we look at data that have been collected about students and analyze the results, teachers can make informed decisions and take instructional action based on the findings. An ethnographic perspective allows the observer to step back and analyze the classroom from the perspective of the actors in the room. This allows the environment to be negotiated everyday depending on the needs of the students and depending on what is taught.

CONCLUSION

Learning about ethnography provides new ways of observing the world. We begin to see that our view of the world is not the only one. In looking from other perspectives, we expand our vision and learn how to see from someone else's angle of vision (Frank, 1999).

REFERENCES

- Agar, M. (1980). *The professional stranger: An informal introduction to ethnography*. New York: Academic Press.
- Fetterman, D. (1998). *Ethnography: Step-by-step (Applied Social Research Methods)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Frank, C. (1999). *Ethnographic eyes: A teacher's guide to classroom observations*. Portsmouth, ME: Heinemann.
- Green, J. & Dixon, C. (1993). Talking knowledge into being: Discursive and social practices in classrooms. *Linguistics and Education* 5(3/4), 231-239.
- Genzuk, M. (2003). A synthesis of ethnographic research. *Center for Multilingual, Multicultural Research Digital Papers Series*. Center for Multilingual, Multicultural Research, University of Southern California. Retrieved May 26, 2004, from http://www-rcf.usc.edu/~genzuk/Ethnographic_Research.html
- Hammersley, M. (1990). *Reading ethnographic research: A critical guide*. London: Longman.
- Krueger, A. (1994). *Focus groups: A practical guide for Applied Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Spradley, J. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

FLaRE Center
Teaching Academy – Suite 403
University of Central Florida
4000 Central Florida Blvd
Orlando, FL 32816-1250
Phone: 407-823-4785
FAX: 407-823-4682
<http://flare.ucf.edu>

FLaRE is a Project of the University of Central Florida College of Education and administered under a grant from the Florida Department of Education and Just Read, Florida!

