

# Centre for Excellence in Enquiry-Based Learning

## Project Case Study

Teaching Ethnography Ethnographically

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### **Abstract**

The Ethnographer's Craft was designed with a view to challenging students to unpack their own notions of responsibility and learning. It was hoped that students' ethnographic approach to their own learning process would do double work: (i) teach them ethnography; (ii) make them aware of how their own learning works.

## Background

The Ethnographer's Craft is a second-year core course in ethnographic research methods. Approximately 40 students register every year for the course, which has traditionally been taught in one semester over ten lectures. The aim of the course is to familiarize students with the practice and writing of ethnography, and with its importance for anthropological and social theory at large. Despite the centrality of fieldwork for anthropological knowledge, the teaching and learning of ethnography have traditionally relied on pedagogical strategies that give priority to literary sources, both theoretical and methodological. Only sometimes are students exposed to the practice of ethnography, but this is almost always late in the semester, as a practical appendix to the course, and often in the form of a collaborative group project that is both episodic in nature (e.g. studying a place or a situation in one week) and, by default, only anecdotally related to the syllabus.

In contrast, The Ethnographer's Craft was designed to help students learn qualitative methods in a practical setting by researching their own learning and university environment. In line with the classical definition of ethnography as a long-term immersion in a field situation, the course was modified to be taught over two semesters (20 classes: 10 lectures and 10 seminars). From week one, students were asked to keep fieldwork diaries, where they recorded samples of their everyday and university experiences. Over the course of the year, the insights gained from diary-keeping were integrated into the classroom pedagogy, using students' own reflective momentum to think through the 'theory' on ethnography. This movement, between theory and reflexive ethnography, was mirrored in the classroom structure, which alternated lectures with seminars: the latter became forums where the insights gained from fieldwork were interrogated and re-contextualized in the light of the theories expounded in the former. Assessment took place at the end of the year, with the students submitting a portfolio of their research outcomes, which included a copy of their diaries and an essay reflecting on the experience. The portfolio was used for assessment purposes.

## Rationale

The Ethnographer's Craft was designed with a view to challenging students to unpack their own notions of responsibility and learning. It was hoped that students' ethnographic approach to their own learning process would do double work: (i) teach them ethnography; (ii) make them aware of how their own learning works.

### **I. Teaching Ethnography**

Traditional approaches to the teaching of ethnography introduce students to the different stages of a research project by getting them to 'read about' ethnography – and occasionally, in an anecdotal fashion, by getting them to do some practical ethnographic work (cf. Ingold 2004). In the same spirit, the pedagogical remit of The Ethnographer's Craft had in previous years been defined *academically*: students were told how ethnography works as a 'method'; what place reflexivity has within that method; what kind of problems and issues ethnographers face at different stages in the research process, including the kinds of (ethical) relationships that anthropologists establish with their 'research subjects'; what makes-up 'good' ethnography, and how this relates to the anthropological argument. Here students' learning was predominantly defined by, if not actually limited to, reading about these topics and discussing them in the classroom. In developing the curriculum for the new Ethnographer's Craft my aim was to introduce a pedagogical step change in the teaching of ethnography at undergraduate level by making ethnography *itself* central to the learning programme. The idea was to teach students the virtues and qualities of ethnography by getting them to *do* ethnography, which included helping them to take stock of how ethnography progresses as a form of knowledge by guiding them in the ongoing analyses of their own findings.

### **II. Self-Awareness about the Learning Experience**

The design of The Ethnographer's Craft inserted itself in a burgeoning literature on reflexivity as the means to enhance the student learning experience (Boud *et al.* 1985; Brockbank and McGill 1998; Moon 1999; McDrury and Alterio 2002). The course's reflexive emphasis on ethnographic

fieldwork participated in this tradition, and further aimed at incorporating opportunities for the pedagogical use of reflective dialogue (Brookfield and Preskill 1999; Witherell and Nodding 1991). In this vein, the course's programme opened up an intellectual space where students were given the opportunity to reflect ethnographically on their own cultural, contextual and personal circumstances, and to acknowledge and integrate these into the educational experience (Mulligan 1993). Moreover, and as Race has noted (1994), the immersion into the practicalities of ethnographic research, and their critical self- and peer cross-examination, provoked in students an increased awareness of how and why qualitative research is ultimately something that one should 'know how to' rather than just 'know about'.

## Approach

The course comprised ten lectures and ten seminars. The lectures were used to cover in a traditional fashion the main 'theory' on ethnography, from the design of a research project to doing fieldwork, reflecting upon it and, finally, writing it up. It included lectures on writing styles and genres, modes of description, note-taking, memorizing, ethics, and reflexivity; on identifying and focusing on relationships and places; and on tracing connections and mapping contexts. Lectures were also used to provide a wider contextual background (political, economic and social) to the experience of attending university at a major urban campus (Moffatt 1989; Nathan 2005). Students were further introduced to some of the political and economic forces shaping the global landscape of higher education today (Robins and Webster 2002; Bok 2003).

The seminar format was used to stimulate debate among students on the topics emerging from their fieldwork experiences, and to exchange perspectives on different techniques for taking field notes and writing-up. Some of the topics that students were alerted to, and encouraged to explore ethnographically, included 'race', 'class', 'gender', 'consumption', 'choice' or 'flexibility'. Most seminars followed up lectures with practical examples and explanations. Some seminars took the topics covered in the lectures in slightly new directions and had their own list of suggested readings.

Students were assigned to one of two seminar groups on the first day of teaching. Group A had to keep diaries every Monday, Thursday and Saturday during term time; Group B, every Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. While lectures were delivered indistinctively to the whole cohort, separate seminars were run for each group.

Students were advised that a reasonable length for a diary entry would be in the range of 400-500 words. (Some students regularly sent entries in excess of 1,000 words.) An email account was created to which students had to submit their entries on a weekly basis. Students were required to anonymize their entries using their student registration number.

As course convenor, I kept a log of all the entries sent by every student, and read almost every entry. This was the most onerous part of the delivery of the course. But it was essential that it be done, because it was the only way to make sure that the focus of the seminars was oriented to the problems, difficulties and interests that the students were writing and reflecting about in their ethnographies.

## Ethics

On their very first day, students were made aware that the *doing* of ethnography, as opposed to the simply *reading* about it, entailed ethical implications which they had to face up to. By committing to the writing of an ethnographic diary, which would in all likelihood entail writing about their teachers, friends, housemates and peers, every student would be integrally involved in the development of a research programme that was their responsibility to take ownership of. Ethics was therefore no longer something they would read about in textbooks but something they themselves had to negotiate with and make explicit in their ethnographies.

As noted above, a requirement of the course was that students anonymize their entries using their registration number. Most students went further and consistently anonymized the people that appeared in their entries. Some students negotiated ethical clearance with their housemates, so that

everyone in the house was aware that conversations held in, for example, the kitchen, could find their way to a diary. Although students were told ways to deal with the ethical implications of their research, the final decision as to how to manage this was theirs.

## Assessment

It should be noted at the outset that crucial to the success of the learning programme was the lecturer's commitment to the monitoring of, and provision of ongoing feedback to, the students' weekly diary submissions. The lecturer had to read an average of 60,000 words worth of ethnography every week. This was only possible because funding had been obtained for the lecturer to dedicate three days per week to the running the project. It is very unlikely that such a course can be run without adequate resources.

The course was assessed on the basis of a course portfolio, which students were requested to submit at the end of the second semester. The portfolio comprised two elements: (i) a copy of all fieldwork diary entries; (ii) an end-of-year commentary and analysis of the diary entries in the form of a 2,500 word essay.

## Diaries

At the beginning of the year students were told that simply keeping-up with diary writing and submission would entitle them to a 2:1. The diary was therefore worth 68% of all marks. It was acknowledged that writing an average of 1,500 words per week amounted to an unusually burdensome workload; so disciplined writing would be rewarded. It was essential, however, that students invested in the development of their ethnographic skills. Keeping a diary was therefore not enough: a personal memoir was no good. It was important that their writing progressed (however gradually) towards the ethnographic genre. Hence the importance of attending lectures and seminars, of re-reading past entries, and re-situating one's experiences in the light of the theoretical debates and discussions covered in the lectures.

## Essay

Equally important, however, was the task of taking stock and reflecting on their own progress as ethnographers. The end-of-year essay, which was weighted with 32% of marks, was devised with this purpose in mind: the idea being that those who took their own learning and training as ethnographers seriously (reflecting theoretically on their own ethnographic practice) would use the essay to trace and think back on their learning experience, explaining the way they saw their progress to ethnographic maturity. The essay title<sup>1</sup> was revealed to students at the beginning of the second semester. The idea behind revealing the question early in the second semester was to help students focus their ethnographic writing during the rest of the course on particular topics of inquiry.

## Evaluation

The course was formally evaluated twice. Informal evaluations took place throughout the course, in class discussions and seminars. Students had also been encouraged to reflect (negatively or positively) on the course when writing their diaries, and were explicitly given the opportunity to bring those views to the fore when writing their end-of-year essay.

## Formal Evaluation

At the end of the first semester, a workshop was organized, to which an external evaluator (from outside the university) and an internal evaluator (from within the anthropology department) were invited.

Prior to the workshop, the evaluators were provided with a set of ten sample diary entries. These were selected by the course convenor. The selection of entries followed the following criteria. There was one entry for every week of classes. Each entry exemplified characteristics that were deemed common to, or indicative of, the general pattern followed by most

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<sup>1</sup> 'Which classical categories of anthropological analysis (e.g. gender, race, ethnicity, community, kinship, class) appear to pervade the 'culture' of university student life? And which categories would you say are exclusive to this 'culture' (i.e. thrown into relief by the 'culture' itself)? Illustrate your answer with examples from an ethnography.'

diaries: some entries were very short, providing little depth of description; some were very personal, lacking description of the surrounding cultural environment; some were judgmental; some made early and worthy efforts at self-reflexivity, incorporating strands of the theory covered in the lectures.

On the day of the workshop, to which all students had been summoned, a group of four volunteers read aloud the entries that the evaluators had been given. Following the reading, the evaluators were asked to provide feedback on the general tone and scope of the entries sampled. This was followed by an open discussion, which generated a lively and interesting debate on doing what the students called 'an ethnography of one's life'. The workshop further provided an opportunity for students to air their concerns and worries over the course to date.

The second evaluation took place in late May, at the end of the course. Students were then handed two sets of questionnaires: a multiple choice questionnaire designed at university level; and a course-specific questionnaire designed at departmental level. The latter contained six open-ended questions, asking students to identify, and give reasons for, their choice of those parts of the course which they most enjoyed and those which they did not understand or did not enjoy. A preliminary analysis of these is given below.

## Informal Evaluation

Student diaries proved an important outlet for expressing views on the course's direction and aim. Especially at the beginning of the year, and loosely over the first semester, many students expressed frustration at not knowing what to write about in their diaries and, therefore, at what they thought was the lack of clear structure and direction in the course's programme. Every effort was made to incorporate these views and concerns into the teaching programme, by directing seminar discussions to the issues that students were identifying in their diaries as central to their ethnographic inquiries.

An evaluative stance on students' capacity to appropriate the course's pedagogical programme was also addressed by them when writing their end-of-year essay. Despite the tightly focused and topical nature of the question, most students took the opportunity to lend their answers a strong reflexive element. Here they reflected on their learning of ethnography, going back to their early diary entries and identifying points of inflection in their self-awareness of cultural forces and issues.

## Analysis: What Worked/ did not Work; What would be done Differently

Students' responses to the course differed, depending on the format of the evaluation. The analysis is not yet completed; sketched below are some preliminary findings.

The questionnaires cast an ambiguous light on the course. Students repeatedly pointed out what they saw as the lack of structure in the course. Approximately one third of the cohort complained that it had never been clear to them what they had to write about. It was no good to be told from the outset that they owned their own research programme; that it was up to them to decide what was interesting about their lives, and what merited being included in the diary. Students demanded that they be told what to focus on.

Retrospectively, I appreciate that it might have indeed been too ambitious to aim at students both learning ethnography *and* designing/deciding their own ethnographic research programme. It is probably advisable, at least during the first semester, for the lecturer to narrow down and choose a set of research topics for students to focus on, such as 'house life', 'going out', 'drink cultures', etc. The downside to this, of course, is that students are not quite doing their own research, but become assistants to someone else's (the lecturer's) research objectives. But this is perhaps a price worth paying, at least for the first half of the course.

Informal evaluations cast a much more positive light on the course. Some students embraced enthusiastically the possibility of doing ethnography and

committed themselves wholeheartedly to the project. Their diaries and their essays showed this: students kept going back to their earlier entries, identifying both literary and theoretical shifts in the themes they wrote about. They became adept at appropriating their own learning experience, and built upon it. The diaries in particular became exceptional showcases of students' abilities at exploring their own learning environment. Some students expanded their research methodologies and started using photographs, soundscapes, maps, webpages, and/or flysheets to enrich their descriptions. Students' personal commitment became apparent at a number of points: they asked for feedback on specific entries, for further reading, for insights into how to disentangle and relativize their own reflexive experience from their cultural milieu.

Seminars too became a crucial pedagogical meeting-point in the course's structure. It was at seminars that students aired their concerns, and at seminars too that the lecturer had an opportunity to address some of the issues and difficulties expressed by students in their diaries. Though some students were adept at realizing the importance of seminar discussions for their own diary-keeping projects, not everyone did. For a future course, it would perhaps be advisable to change the structure of interactions at seminars. Notwithstanding the importance of open-ended discussions, I would recommend that seminars be structured so that all students present part of their ethnographic findings. This is no doubt a delicate matter, because it may violate anonymity and demands that questions of ethics be rethought. But in my opinion it is something worth thinking about, even if it requires a little imagination as to how to circumvent ethical challenges.

## Further development

Originally conceptualized as a pilot project in teaching ethnography ethnographically, *The Ethnographer's Craft* is now returning to its usual pedagogical format. The learning benefits to the student body notwithstanding, as originally conceived the course is burdened by a fundamental flaw: it is very onerous, and thus costly, for a single lecturer to deliver. Some thought is being given to how to incorporate some of the benefits of the ethnographic approach without assuming all its costs.

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