Classroom Ethnography

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Introduction

It is necessary to put some boundaries around the notion of classroom ethnography. As qualitative, narratively descriptive studies of teaching and of everyday life in classrooms developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, some researchers referred to any such studies as ethnography. That is too broad a characterization – it blurs some important distinctions between ethnography and other forms of qualitative inquiry. On the other hand, a rigidly canonical definition of classroom ethnography could be too narrow – it might rule as out-of-bounds studies that were ethnographic in spirit but not in form. That would be easy to do, since the term ethnography, as applied to classroom research, is a metaphoric characterization rather than a literal one. Classroom ethnography does not correspond exactly to the classical methods and content of general ethnography. Yet classroom research that is ethnographic in intent bears certain family resemblances to general ethnography. We hope to make clear here what makes classroom ethnography ethnographic, and to present and discuss some key examples of classroom studies that have been undertaken along ethnographic lines. Another way to say this is that ethnography, as employed in classroom research, is not so much a set of techniques or methods as it is a perspective, a particular intellectual stance (see the discussion of Wolcott (2008: 67–89) on ethnography as a way of seeing). Accordingly, we need to consider the intellectual history out of which the perspective and stance of ethnography has developed.

Origins of General Ethnography

The word ethnography was invented in the late nineteenth century as a new term based on the combination of two Greek words: *graphein*, the verb for to write, and *ethnoi*, a plural noun for the nations – the others. Liddell and Scott's *Greek Lexicon* defines the singular noun *ethnos* as "A number of people accustomed to live together, a company, a body of men." But this definition slides by a distinction that makes a difference. For the ancient Greeks, ethnoi were not just groupings of people – in whatever scale of grouping one might want to consider – they were the groupings of people who were not Greek. *Ethnoi* was the contrast term for *'ellenoi*. Hellenes were referred to as we and ethnoi were referred to as they – Thracians, Scythians, Phrygians, Persians, Etruscans, Egyptians, and Mesopotamians. The Greeks were more than a little xenophobic, so that ethnoi carries pejorative implications. To see the force of this, we can consider that in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures the Hebrew term for them – *goyim* – was translated as *ethnoi*, and in modern as in ancient Hebrew the term goy is not a compliment. All this is to say that the most accurate definition of the term ethnography, given its etymology and its initial use in the nineteenth century to refer to descriptive accounts of the lifeways of non-Western people, is "writing about other people."

Another term that became current in the late nineteenth century was ethnology. This means the comparative study of the meanings of differing patterns of organization and custom across differing human groups. Ethnology looks across separate ethnographic case studies of particular human groups for similarities and differences across the groups. Descriptive data from ethnography thus becomes the grist for the analytic mills of ethnology. Ethnography is always conducted with a comparative frame around it – the assumption is that what is being seen is not simply natural but arbitrary – that local lifeways are constructed. Each separate society and its lifeways are considered against the backdrop of comparison with all other human societies, known from contemporary research and from archeology, history, and prehistory.

In the ancient world Herodotus, the Greek scholar writing in the fifth century BCE, had interests that were ethnographic and ethnological as well as historical. Writing in the second century CE, the Greek skeptical philosopher Sextus Empiricus conducted a cross-cultural survey of morality, showing that what was considered right in one society was considered wrong in others. He worked from the accounts of travelers, and these continued to provide the primary basis for comparative knowledge about human lifeways until the late nineteenth century.

Ethnography claimed to be more thorough and comprehensive in its description than had been the reports previously written by travelers, soldiers, and colonial officers. Perhaps the first monograph of the kind that would become modern ethnography comes from urban sociology. DuBois (1899) conducted a study of a particular census tract in Philadelphia which was then the primary neighborhood of residence for African-Americans in the city. His report, titled *The Negro in Philadelphia*, combined demographic data, area maps, recent community history, and surveys of local institutions and community groups, with some descriptive accounts of the conduct of daily life in the neighborhood. His purpose in writing what can be

considered the first ethnography was to make visible the lives – and the orderliness in those lives – of people who had been heretofore invisible. A similar purpose and descriptive approach, combining demography and health statistics with narrative accounts, was taken in the reports of working-class life in East London that were prepared in the 1890s by Charles Booth, together with Beatrice and Sidney Webb (see Booth, 1891). Even more emphasis on narrative description was found in *How the Other Half Lives,* an account of the everyday life of immigrants on the lower East Side of New York City, written by the journalist Jacob Riis and illustrated with photographs (Riis, 1890). All these authors were social reformers. They were not simply producing description for its own sake – they were describing in order to advocate and inform social change.

Although their descriptions were not value neutral, these early practitioners of what can be called ethnography did not claim to be describing everyday life from the points of view of those who lived it. Their descriptions, in other words, were conducted from an etic point of view – based on a descriptive language of facts that were presented as self-evidently accurate and objective, behaviorally. They did not claim to be identifying behavioral differences that made a difference for subjective meaning among the people whose lives they were describing, that is, they did not claim that their descriptions had emic epistemological status. The interpretive significance of certain behaviors for everyday meaning, as Geertz (1973: 6) says what distinguishes an eye blink from a wink, was not what they were aiming at.

To portray social action (as wink) rather than behavior (as eye blink) – that is, to describe the conduct of everyday life in ways that make contact with the subjective orientations and meaning perspectives of those whose conduct is being reported – is the fundamental shift in interpretive (hermeneutical) stance within ethnography that was claimed to have been accomplished by Malinowski (1922) in his monograph *Argonauts of the Western Pacific.* He said that ethnographic description should not only be factually accurate, but that it should represent "the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world" Malinowski (1922: 25). Malinowski, who was Polish, began fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands in 1914 and was then interned by the British colonial authorities because they suspected he might be a spy. Forced to remain in the Trobriands for the next 4 years, Malinowski later made a virtue of necessity and claimed that his long-term fieldwork and knowledge of the local language enabled him to write a report that not only encompassed the system of everyday life in its entirety but which accurately represented nuances of local meaning in its daily conduct. As people would say later, his descriptive reporting had emic validity, or interpretive validity. After Malinowski, this became a hallmark of ethnography in anthropology – reporting whose descriptions made contact with the meaning perspectives of those whose daily actions were being described. (This aim is never

fully realizable. The ethnographer can never completely discover or communicate the vision of the world as it is held by the people he or she studies – nor is there necessarily a single vision shared identically among those that are studied. However, approximating the meaning perspectives of those studied is a defining intention in ethnographic work.)

To conclude this brief overview of general ethnography, here is a description of ethnography by the contemporary anthropologist Conklin (1968: 172): "[ethnographic data] derive ultimately from the direct observation of customary behavior in particular societies. Making, reporting, and evaluating such observations are the tasks of ethnography . . . [An ethnography] requires a long period of intimate study and residence in a small, well-defined community, knowledge of the spoken language, and the employment of a wide range of observational techniques including prolonged face-to-face contacts with members of the local group, direct participation in some of that group's activities, and a greater emphasis on intensive work with informants than on the use of documentary or survey data." More abstractly Conklin said in another place, "an adequate ethnography is here considered to include the culturally significant arrangement of productive statements about the relevant relationships obtaining among locally defined categories and contexts (of objects and events) within a given social matrix. These . . . should comprise, essentially, a cultural grammar." (Conklin, 1964: 25). An even more modern definition of ethnography would be that it considers the setting that is studied as a local community of practice and identifies the full range of variation in practices that occur there, within the full range of culturally significant situations or activity types, considering the meaning perspectives that underlie the conduct of the cultural practices that take place (see also the discussion in Anderson-Levitt, 2006).

Classroom Ethnography

One of the chief differences between classroom ethnography and classic general ethnography is that classroom ethnography is usually done by researchers who have themselves spent time there as children. This is what can be called domestic ethnography in contrast to exotic ethnography. Classic general ethnography was done by researchers who went to places with which they were unfamiliar – either to village groupings or tribal groupings of so-called primitive people in the colonies ruled by Western empires or to slums inhabited by poor people in large European or American cities. The aim was to make visible the lifeways of people who were literally off the map and to communicate this portrayal to audiences in polite Western society generally and in academia more specifically.

The core task of exotic ethnography, then, is to make the strange and unknown familiar and intelligible. This is

very different from a study of a school classroom that is similar to those previously attended by the ethnographic researcher and also by the researcher's readers. In such domestic ethnography, the core task for the researcher as a fieldworker – and ultimately for the researcher's audience – is to make the familiar strange, and in so doing to make habitual actions visible. The reason to do ethnographic case studies of familiar places like classrooms is that they are too familiar for us to understand at first glance – habit makes daily practice partially and sometimes wholly invisible to its practitioners – thus we need to strangify the familiar in order to see it. Marx said that for scholarly inquiry "the problem is not to understand the world but to change it." Yet we must be able to see daily practices before we can decide whether or not to change them. The critical inquiry that is inherent in domestic ethnography means that we study everyday practices with possible change in mind, yet we withhold judgment on changing things until we have made a detailed and comprehensive description of the everyday practices themselves. (this point is discussed in the Conclusion section).

It was said at the outset that the connections were not direct between classic general ethnography – portraying the whole way of life of a naturally occurring local grouping of people, with research typically being done by an outsider. Classroom ethnography portrays a topic-focused account of some aspects of a particular institutional setting in which none of the participants live their entire lives, with research typically being done by someone who, if not exactly an insider, still knows much about the setting, including knowledge that comes from prior life experience in similar settings. Having reviewed principal characteristics of general ethnography it is now appropriate to summarize key aspects of classroom research that might be ethnographic, bearing family resemblance to general ethnography if not one-to-one correspondence with it.

We want to present a deliberately generous definition – one that would include many studies although it would exclude some. A classroom study that was ethnographic in approach would have the following characteristics:

1. Long-term, close observation of and participation by the researcher in routinely recurring daily activities.
2. Consideration of the setting, both during fieldwork and in reporting, as a local ecosystem of relations of simultaneous and mutual influence among differing aspects or components.
3. Identification of the total cast of characters in the setting, the variation that obtains locally in ways of enacting their roles, and the structured relationships of power and authority in relation to one another (a portrayal of the overall social organization, formal and informal).
4. Identification of the full range of activities and social situations that take place in the setting (with special emphasis on the spatial and temporal location and

organization of each activity as well as on the culturally significant practices, verbal and nonverbal, of the various participants in those activities).
5. Identification of the meaning perspectives that are entailed in the conduct of the everyday practices that occur.

   (Implicit and explicit beliefs, values, and identities, including local ontologies and epistemologies. These are systems of belief about what is real in the world that, in a classroom, take the place of a folk religious world-view – what truly exists, what is right and wrong, and how we can know that, what is knowledge, what are learners, what is learning, what is evidence of learning, and basic postulates such as "order must be established before learning can take place.")

Unlike a general ethnography, a classroom ethnography would not include description of the practices by which subsistence is maintained and economic relations are conducted, just as there would be no literal description of a legal system or of folk medicine. Yet an ethnographic classroom study might document the exchange of goods in a symbolic economy (student effort as exchanged for classroom rewards such as grades and teacher regard), local notions of fairness and due process, and local notions of and standards for physical, emotional, and intellectual health and growth. (For an earlier discussion along these lines, see Erickson, 1973/1984.)

Given the emphasis on holism in general ethnography, an ethnographic classroom study might most appropriately be done in early grades classrooms, where teacher and students participate together across an entire day, in a variety of activity settings, confronting various subject matters – conditions that are more analogous to the intimacy of acquaintance and commonality of horizon in daily life that are found in a naturally occurring small community. In middle school, high school, and college classrooms, where only one subject is taught and the students meet as a class for a single instructional period and then move on to other classrooms, the analogy with daily life in a small community such as a village is more loose, and it may be less appropriate to consider such classrooms as settings for study that is ethnographic in spirit. Still there could be a family resemblance with ethnography in such settings.

In our judgment, approaches to classroom study that would not be ethnographic would include the following:

1. Studies of the formal subject matter being taught that do not include the hidden curriculum that accompanies subject matter instruction.

   (When math or reading or any other particular subject matter is being taught, so are assumptions about the nature of knowledge and of knowers, gender, racial, ethnic, and language identity in relation to learning subject matter, power relationships with the teacher, relative privilege differences among students.)

2. Studies of relations between the teacher(s) and students that consider those social identity categories as unitary and fixed, rather than as multidimensional and in dynamic ecological relationship.

(Usually there is more than one kind of student in a class – various student characters – and more than one kind of way of enacting being the teacher. Moreover, power relations are reflexively related – teachers do not simply control students through classroom management – students push back, and upon occasion it is students who manage the teacher rather than vice versa.)

3. Studies conducted short-term – a 2-week – observational study, let alone a single class period's or a single school day's observation, would not be ethnographic.

(One might prepare a narrative descriptive account from such drive-by ethnography but genuinely ethnographic work presumes that local custom – local cultural practices – are nuanced and locally distinctive and that such subtleties in the organization of the conduct of everyday life in a local setting require repeated learning attempts by the fieldworker – repeated visits across substantial strips of time – in order to answer such questions as "What is the actual full range of different ways of being a student in this particular classroom?"

This is all the more necessary when the observer has surface familiarity with the classroom and thus needs time to make the familiar strange and visible.)

Let us consider a few illustrative examples of classroom ethnography, early and current. First, two case studies conducted in the early 1950s by George Spindler and published later. The first case study is of a fifth-grade classroom whose teacher was given the pseudonym Roger Harker (Spindler and Spindler, 1982). Spindler's description highlighted differences between formal and informal social organization in the classroom. He found that students who were doing well academically were all seated on one side of the room, while students who were not doing so well were all seated on the other side – and that was the side where the students of minority and/or of low family income sat. The second case study is of a girl from that classroom, called Beth Anne, who was chosen because of her reputation in the school as a well-adjusted child (see Spindler and Spindler, 1990). As Spindler observed Beth Anne across a wide range of activity settings in the classroom and on the playground, it became apparent that she was subtly anxious. She was a more complex, multiple-faceted person than she had been typecast as, on the basis of surface appearances and on the basis of seeing her in only a limited range of activity settings.

In a volume by Jules Henry titled *Culture against Man* containing chapters on elementary classrooms, the theme of student anxiety over achievement and over relationships among peers was continued and extended (Henry, 1963). Henry's portrayal of the classroom shows how competition among students and carping criticism of one another's' performances were ubiquitous, as was the expression of affection by the teacher as a means of intensifying the students' anxiety over achievement. As in the Spindler's portrayals, the emphasis is on contrast between the official, formal social organization of the classroom and its unofficial informal organization, and the hidden curriculum of social relations and emotionality around learning is foregrounded, as well as consideration of the manifest curriculum of subject matter instruction. Another pioneering work was Philip Jackson's book length report *Life in Classrooms* (1968). In it he considered classroom practices and social organization from the perspective of ethology, the observational study of naturally occurring behavior among animals. Among the points Jackson emphasized was that as a child enters a school classroom, one of the things the child has to do (in contrast from family life at home) is learn how to be a member of a crowd. Also the child has to learn how to wait in the crowd. The development of boredom management techniques follows from this. Once again, informal social organization and hidden curriculum were being emphasized.

Perhaps the most comprehensive of the early attempts at ethnographic study of classrooms was the book length account of an entire year in an inner city seventh-grade self-contained classroom, co-authored by Louis M. Smith, the ethnographer, and William Geoffrey (pseudonym), the classroom teacher. Published in 1968 and titled *The Complexities of an Urban Classroom* (Smith and Geoffrey, 1968), this account emphasized the development of special roles by various children, in a distinctly local classroom social order that evolved over the first days and weeks of school – thus an emphasis on informal social organization. The book also described the teacher's approaches to personalizing instruction – relating differently to different students depending upon their distinct strengths and needs – while still working within the framework of traditional curriculum and use of standard textbooks.

Teacher-authored accounts of classroom life have often been done from a holistic ethnographic perspective. An early example of this is Kohl's (1968) *Thirty-Six Children*, and a more recent example is Cynthia Ballenger's account of literacy instruction in a bilingual classroom (Ballenger, 1999).

Frank (1999) has published a guide to teachers' research in their own classrooms titled *Ethnographic Eyes*. Hammersley (1990) is a good general resource on classroom ethnography, illustrating ethnographic studies of classrooms and discussing methods for accomplishing them. The discussion in Castanheira *et al.* (2001) is also useful.

Conclusion

In recent years, there has been a burgeoning of classroom studies, especially concerning instruction in literacy,

science, and mathematics, that describe themselves as ethnographic in orientation – far too many to review here. Some of these studies are ethnographic only in the sense that they are narratively descriptive, or in that they present a transcript of classroom discourse. Some of these incompletely ethnographic studies focus entirely on subject matter instruction – the manifest curriculum – and ignore the hidden curriculum. Many take a broader view that is indeed ethnographic; a holistic view of everyday scenes of classroom life as learning environments, socioculturally organized, with both official and unofficial aspects, with both manifest and hidden curriculum. These are studies that view the classroom as at once locally constructed and as connected with and influenced by wider spheres of social control and its contestation in society more generally. Routine classroom practices are portrayed as socially and culturally constructed, considering the particular local construction at hand as a specific variation within a world-wide range of possibilities. That ethnological backdrop for ethnographic case studies of classroom life continually suggests possibilities for change – it implies that what has been constructed locally in a particular way holds continuing possibility for reconstruction.

Yet the ethnographic emphasis on the specifics of local social and cultural ecology suggests that single-factor approaches to change – quick fixes – will not be successful. Rather, multiple components of the classroom ecosystem must be changed, in concert with one another. For example, let us consider a teacher who wanted to change mathematics instruction from an emphasis on procedures for finding the right answer to an emphasis on deep conceptual understanding of basic mathematical ideas. If students were to be able to discuss alternative ideas about mathematics, practices in the conduct of discussion would need to change, in order to alter the system of carping criticism, mockery, and overall competition among students as described by Jules Henry. As a student it is more face threatening to have to say what you think and defend it than it is to call out a right answer. The teacher, as manager of social relations in the classroom, would need somehow to make it safe for students to disagree with one another.

Teacher beliefs about learners would also need to change – students would need to be seen by the teacher as capable of understanding key concepts thoroughly and of articulating those understandings in talking and writing. Changes in other subject matter instructional practices might also follow. If right answers are no longer the primary focus in mathematics instruction, what about allowing invented spelling and punctuation in writing – emphasizing the primacy of the sense of what is being written over the canonical form of the writing? What about basic postulates? The teacher's assumption that order must be established before learning can take place, as mentioned earlier, might well be replaced by an assumption that order usually follows student interest and understanding. Finally, what about assessment? If high stakes testing in an accountability system external to the classroom emphasizes student knowledge of facts and simple skills as evidence of learning, the teacher's attempt to teach mathematics for understanding might become difficult to implement – not impossible, but it would require the teacher to swim upstream against strong cultural currents.

Changes in the social organization of a classroom learning environment, the ethnographer would assume, would necessarily accompany changes in the subject matter content of instruction. In other words, the social–ecological perspective of classroom ethnography suggests that when change happens in one aspect of classroom practices, changes in a whole system of classroom practices would likely follow.

In sum, the ethnographic perspective on classrooms as learning environments assumes that what humans have made they can change, even though that may well involve changes in multiple aspects of practices. It further assumes that if enduring change is to happen in classrooms, local autonomy is necessary to be exercised on a daily basis by the teachers and students who live there. This is an inherently critical stance for classroom research, yet it is criticism with empathy for and understanding of members' points of view, and with respect for their capacities for sense-making even when the researcher may not fully agree with the sense that is being made. It is criticism presented by a researcher who was both stranger and friend to those among whom he or she became closely acquainted with their locally distinctive way of life.

See also: Critical Ethnography; Ethnography; Hermeneutics.

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