

Teaching ethnography as method: legacies and future practices [TAN]

Convenors

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Workshop Abstract

Over the years there have been many workshops at EASA conferences on the changing nature of ethnographic research. Because of time and financial constraints— but even more because of shifts in social life and the focus on new topics of research, our ethnographic practices have also changed from deep hanging out to fieldwork by appointment; from residential- to non-residential fieldwork; from conversations to structured interviews, from personal encounters to internet research, in short: from 'traditional' Malinowskian fieldwork to flexible time-frames and methodological pluralism. Although these changes have been debated and reflected upon in conferences and articles, much less attention has been paid to the consequences it has had for our teaching. In this workshop we want to take stock of how these changing practices of doing ethnographic research have influenced our teaching and therefore we seek contributions on how new ways of doing ethnographic research have found their way into our programs at bachelor, masters and PhD level.

PAPERS

1) Apprenticing with Elder Charles Solomon, Medicine Man: honouring the ceremony of ethnographic practise

Evie Plaice (University of New Brunswick)

Abstract

Apprenticing as a practise in learning has declined over the past few decades. Yet it remains a preferred practise in certain areas of society. In a recent project involving Indigenous mother-tongue speakers of an endangered language, my graduate students and I worked closely with several key Elders. Luke, in particular, began working with Elder Charles Solomon about ten years ago and became one of a group of apprentices of Elder Charles's environmental knowledge. Luke was already working with Elder Charles when he began his graduate degree in anthropology. Luke's apprenticeship, then, has at its core the two fundamental relationships: apprentice/Elder, and student/mentor-supervisor. This nexus of relationships bear directly on another emergent feature of ethnographic practise: Indigenous methodologies, were long term, mutual, commensurate and respectful relationships based upon accountability are key. The example of Luke's apprenticeship argues against the trend towards managed and monitored 'part-time' ethnography. But it also introduces changes in the way we practise and teach ethnography which are equally remote from the traditional 'Malinoskian' practises of the past century. How do we prepare our students for ethnographic research that is about forming and honouring mutual and accountable relationships where the role of the 'informant' has become the role of respected mentor, where the outcomes are both shared and highly visible, and where the award of a degree is only a minor part of the transaction?

2) Teaching and learning ethnography in Southeastern Europe: making sense of a complex world and providing expertise for professional careers

Ioannis Manos (University of Macedonia)

Abstract

When teaching ethnography and talking about anthropology in the Greek universities, we try to make students familiar with the study of otherness and introduce them to alternative ways of understanding social phenomena. Yet, we deal with perceptions of cultural difference shaped by notions of cultural homogeneity. Moreover, our students have never heard of anthropology before, and according to a prevailing mindset they probably do not even need Anthropology for their academic and professional careers, let alone pursuing a job as anthropologists.

How can we demonstrate ethnography's potentials in studying diversity and understanding social reality? And then show its utility in making a living from it? These considerations require a revisiting of the teaching process for a better understanding of the discipline and its method.

If ethnography is regarded as the fundamental mode of production of anthropological knowledge, its teaching can be carried out both in the classroom and through the conduct of intensive short-term research projects. This concept of the experiential learning of ethnography seeks to combine theory with practice. It connects the knowledge presented in the classroom with the lived experience in the 'field'. This approach activates the personal experiences of the participating students in order to push them to a reflective consideration of their own mode of perceiving reality.

The paper reflects on teaching experiences in various academic and non-academic contexts and discusses the practices employed, the educational objectives set and the challenges and dilemmas dealt with when teaching ethnography in a Greek/Southeast European academic context.

3) Teaching for learning (and producing): involving the student in the ethnographic research process

Gareth Hamilton (University of Latvia)

Abstract

In a constructivist mode which highly values the contribution of the student in the learning process of both student and of teacher, in this paper I consider the importance of involving the local student in the process of doing ethnographic research led by non-native staff. I consider two examples. First, I reflect upon discussions with students on ongoing research projects, namely in this case my engagement as researcher on a European Capital of Culture-funded film project. While the experiences of collaborating with a film maker is a valuable learning tool for methodological education, I debate to what extent our own students can act as a forum for testing cases where local sensibilities might be wounded by outsiders, especially in a post-socialist country where in general 'westerners' and their research agendas have been seen as neocolonialist, insulting or inconsiderate. The second example

relates to engaging students in producing research collaboratively, destined for publication. Picking up on ethical issues in the first example, I question what benefits can exist in students getting involved, for the students, including as named co-authors. However, taking in to account questions that arise from the transience of the degree earning process, I consider whether there are risks of exploitation, and if such risks exist, how might these be mitigated for the benefits of the students and of anthropological knowledge production due to their local expertise.

4) Lessons from teaching ethnography for students of languages

Lisa Bernasek (University of Southampton)
Marion Demossier (The University of Southampton)
Heidi Armbruster (Southampton University)

Abstract

Based on our work with undergraduate students of Modern Languages at the University of Southampton, UK, in this paper we will explore the consequences for teaching of constraints on two factors long considered central to 'traditional' ethnographic fieldwork: time and language proficiency. Ethnography has been taught within Modern Languages degree programmes as a research method and a means of developing the cultural engagement central to students' experiences during their period of residence abroad. In this paper we will discuss our experiences teaching ethnography in two contrasting contexts: as part of a semester-long module that culminates in a short-term 'home ethnography' assessment; and as part of an 18-month project to train and support students in carrying out ethnographic research during their year abroad. We will focus particularly on the possibilities and limitations of short-term ethnography and the effects of language proficiency. (How) can students develop an 'ethnographic eye', either when working on very short-term projects 'at home' or in the context of somewhat longer projects in the new environments they are thrust into when on their period of residence abroad? What effect does language proficiency or confidence have on students' ability (and willingness) to engage with and make sense of a new cultural context? Is ethnographic observation made easier for students when carried out in their first language, or does this inhibit their ability to 'make strange' the world around them?

5) The nocturnal anthropologist: exploring the method of nocturnal fieldwork spitalfields market, City of London corporation

Iulius-Cezar Macarie (Central European University)

Abstract

This paper explores the difficulties posed by past legacies, such as diurnal ethnography as the dominant point of reference in anthropological research. When testing and navigating in the darkness with the nocturnal participant observation to examine the complex subjectivities of migrants nightshifting at the market, nocturnal fieldwork puts great strain on the ethnographer's diurnal life. Both, the corporeality on the ethnographer's body and mind, and the methodological puzzles that awaits her/him are explored, addressing:

(a) At which point can s/he say that they get used to the night rhythms of life in-out of the research that s/he conducts? When should the researcher pull out of the field, conscious of the tiredness? How does tiredness affect the chances of gathering useful material?

(b) By turning native, i.e. living an antithetic way of life to diurnal creatures - just like my respondents I too have my boots and hands dirty while I load produce or drive the forklift around the market, six nights per week, on 10.5 hour shift, with 5 hours day sleep. Depth of participation and length in the field, and being up and working at night made me empathetic with the workers' precarity, which perhaps affected my power of observing the less-visible forms of solidarity or competition. Or their reactions sometimes helped or other times hindered my nocturnal investigation?

6) Reflections on fieldwork in Prague: teaching/learning experiment

Marketa Zandlova (Faculty of Humanities, Charles University in Prague)

Michal Lehecka (Charles University in Prague)

Abstract

Teaching and learning ethnographic methods is a challenge. Moreover, real harm to real people can be done if both, teaching and learning, isn't done properly. Our goal as lecturers is to make those processes as rewarding as possible, therefore we decided to perform a teaching experiment. In the presentation we wish to expose and simultaneously evolve an experimental project, our EASA presentation itself being part of it. The project starts in February 2016 and its idea is as follows: we (lecturers) will film us and students of a methodology course (at the Anthropology department, Charles University, Prague) during their very first performances in the field, in the course of discussions of our field experiences and also of the emerging film. Simultaneously we want to take notes of all these events. At the end of the course, we (lecturers) will edit a short movie that should be a basis for the second part of the project: sharing and discussing this "product" of our understanding of the seminar with students and with the audience at the EASA workshop. Everything should be filmed, edited, presented. Afterwards we wish to encourage our students to make their own "field-movies" and re-interpret (probably deconstruct?) our previous representation of the teaching/learning process. The goal of our endeavour is threefold: : 1) to provide feedback for the students, incentive for their self-reflection 2) to deepen our sensitivity as teachers 3) to scrutinize the process of teaching-learning-presenting ethnographic methods classes, with all its deepness, potentials and limits.