

From lecture to lived method: Bringing ethnography alive in the classroom



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As a lawyer/ linguist, turned philosopher/ social scientist, turned health services researcher and digital health innovator, my methodological identity has at least remained consistent over the past two decades! Although I have traversed disciplines and worked on multiple and mixed methods projects, my enduring passion and notable contribution to research and teaching has concerned ethnography/observation.

‘Ethnography’ broadly involves the systematic study of, and writing about, people, societies, and cultures using direct observation. Ethnography requires immersion and depth of genuine shared experience, connection, compassion and co-production with groups in everyday places and spaces over a period of time, meanwhile gathering all forms of data possible – memories, conversations, information via notes, pictures, artefacts – and then a professional distance for writing up, which is conducted in ways that other approaches omit from data collection, analysis and reporting. I consistently champion embracing the complexity of conducting such work in challenging operational settings to realise its value in knowledge generation. I have broken boundaries in applying observational and participatory techniques within places I do not belong, police stations, mother and baby groups, and ambulances.

Despite the competitive funding landscape, I have advocated for building in this resource-intensive and ethically provocative approach into projects of all scales and I continue to proactively teach the next generation of researchers not just the what and why but also the how. In a one- or two-hour lectures as part of a series of ‘introductions to’ various qualitative research methods, I employ some tactics to spark ‘aha’ lightbulb moments in the students’ learning about ethnography.

Over the years, I have meant to write up a pedagogical reflection on teaching ethnography/ observation. I have published a methodological case study (Morgan 2017) and papers (Morgan et al 2015, Porter et al 2020) reporting ethnographic research findings for NIHR but I have never

explained the way that I impart, inspire and equip others to pursue this method themselves within a classroom, and so I appreciate this opportunity.

When I teach ethnography/ observation, predominantly to postgraduate students in the applied health sciences with clinical or scientific backgrounds (and very much in quantitative comfort zones where research experience is concerned), I am looking for them to imagine how it is to do ethnography, to be an observer/ participant, to see the ordinary in new ways, to perceive wonder in the mundane, to challenge conventions and norms in their perspectives.

After the initial introduction to the session, I begin by physically re-positioning myself around the room to question why I stand at the front to lecture. I ask how they all knew to file in and sit on chairs at desks facing the front. I invite them to imagine me stood there with my back to the class and how it would feel if I was behind them. There are some laughs, some interesting expressions, but we all start to consider why we do things.

I then develop this and move a chair, which I sit on, at first facing students with a notepad and pen, intently staring. Next, I sit to the side behind the class, discreetly, before joining a row of students, covertly 'fitting in' as one. I talk about observer/ participant roles in ethnography, using body language and props to discuss the effects these have on natural settings and relationships between research participants and ethnographers, referencing Gold's Typology (1958).

Following on from these more physical 'play acting' gestures, I talk about activities like getting the bus to class, buying groceries, everyday things we engage in. I query why we do things like wait at a bus stop – how do we know to do that, what we ask the driver, why we move quickly and awkwardly to a seat, perhaps say 'good morning' to a fellow passenger.

Why do we discuss the weather with a shop assistant, talk holidays with hairdressers?

We then consider people, cultures and exoticism. The weather and holidays – are they uniquely British customs? What assumptions are we making? How do we fit in? What do we miss? How do we take care and acknowledge the privilege we may have in being able to conduct ethnographic research – quite literally 'writing about people'. I display a 1920s photograph of anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski ([image](https://static.polityka.pl/resource/res/path/be/16/be16c69a-a731-4786-aa27-cbf1a7fa7413) here:

<https://static.polityka.pl/resource/res/path/be/16/be16c69a-a731-4786-aa27-cbf1a7fa7413>), widely regarded as the Father of Ethnography, Malinowski, a then middle-aged white man

donning a pale suit, is sat in the middle of a group of black men wearing traditional clothing. His work, while having a profound and lasting effect on the discipline of social anthropology due to his groundbreaking field research among indigenous communities, became controversial as his representations of 'others' and, his ethnocentric diaries, later raised questions about his (perhaps of its time) outlook.

In a direct attempt to decolonise the curriculum at the University of Aberdeen, where I teach, I present students with Horace Miner's 1956 'Nacirema'). As we read the short piece, I observe the 'aha' moments as each student, each reader, realises that this is a joke article, a critique of Malinowski, and those about whom they are reading are 'Americans' (anagram). The charm boxes, household shrines and mouth rites lose their magic and become oddly familiar.

Through this process, I try to bring ethnography to life by creating an immersive experience to help students understand not just the theory (which features in the slide deck too!), but the practice. I want them to question everything they do and see, to acknowledge the wonder an ethnographer should find in every detail, and their merits as data/evidence, but also to be responsible researchers when representing people, societies and cultures.

References

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