

## **The Fifty Minute Ethnography: Teaching Theory through Fieldwork**

Susanna Trnka<sup>1</sup>

*University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand 1142*

---

### **Abstract**

Ethnography is becoming an increasingly popular research methodology used across a number of disciplines. Typically, teaching students how to write an ethnography, much less how to undertake “fieldwork” (or the ethnographic research upon which ethnographies are based), is reserved for senior- or MA-level research methods courses. This article examines the pedagogical strategy of engaging first-year students in ethnographic field methods and the art of ethnographic writing and suggests how the use of a short ethnographic exercise (the fifty minute mini-ethnography) can enable students who are at the beginning of their undergraduate degrees to better understand the relationships between theory and empirical data.

**Keywords:** Ethnography, fieldwork, teaching theory.

---

Long considered the hallmark of social or cultural anthropology, ethnography is becoming an increasingly popular research methodology across a number of disciplines, including not only Arts and Humanities subjects such as sociology or gender studies but also education, the medical sciences and business studies. Undergraduate degrees in anthropology usually require students to read and critique a fair number of ethnographies, often starting in their introductory courses. Students do not, however, tend to go “out into the field” and produce their own ethnographies until they reach at least the senior year of their undergraduate studies, and in some cases, not until they begin their MAs. This article examines the outcomes of a different approach; namely, engaging first-year students in ethnographic field methods and the art of ethnographic writing.

In 2010, I began a three-year stint of teaching a broad-ranging introduction to social and cultural anthropology. (I work at a large, public university at which all of the tenured instructors in social-cultural anthropology rotate through the introductory course, teaching it for three or four years at a time). With an average class size of 330 students, it is by far our largest social-cultural anthropology class. In the past, this course’s assessments have focused on a close reading of a short ethnographic text, a research paper on a pre-determined topic, and a final exam. In my first year of teaching this course, I found that while these assessment tools were useful and students walked away with a range of skills relating to how to structure an essay or use the library more effectively, they did not con-

---

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author's email: s.trnka@auckland.ac.nz

vey the centerpiece of anthropological knowledge: ethnography. I surmised that if students are to emerge from their first year course with some sort of understanding – regardless of how elementary it might be – of how knowledge can be produced through ethnographic methods, they would have a much richer appreciation of why this method is increasingly popular across a range of disciplines. Even more importantly, they would have firsthand experience of the benefits and challenges of applying theory to our understandings of everyday life. But how can we teach students a practice known for in-depth community engagement and long-term commitment as part of an introductory, lecture-based course?

### What is Ethnography?

Ethnography is a genre of writing characterized by the interweaving conceptual analysis with rich empirical description (sometimes called “thick description,” after the work of the interpretive anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973)). It is grounded in fieldwork, a research method in which the researcher joins the community under study, immersing themselves in their daily lives. Though there are a variety of ways of practicing ethnography today, the classic anthropological model requires sustained engagement in community life for the period of a year or more. During this time, researchers need to be attentive not just to “big events” or information gleaned from structured interviews and discussions, but to the flotsam and jetsam of how people construct the most mundane aspects of ordinary lives, from how they hold their toothbrushes to what they read online – what one of the founders of this method, Bronislaw Malinowski (1932), famously named “the imponderabilia of actual life.” How one gains access to such intimate aspects of people’s lives, and the myriad of different aspects of “the imponderabilia of actual life” that should be recorded, is the stuff of (often heated) debate. What is usually not debated is the fact that immersive, open-ended research often requires long term commitment as well as a researcher who is willing to suspend being directive and let the research process play out in front of her or him. Practitioners often stress the open-ended nature of fieldwork, and while their research might involve structured fieldwork engagements or directed questioning, it requires as much, if not more, *nondirected* engagement, or what one anthropologist called, “deep hanging out” (Geertz, 1998). Serendipity plays a key role in shaping the structure of research as does allowing our research interlocutors steer, and sometimes set, the research agenda (Shore & Trnka, 2013, p. 10). As one business analyst wrote in the *Harvard Business Review*, in using ethnographic methods, “our goal is to see people’s behavior on their terms” (Anderson, 2009). Researchers must thus be ready, for example, to shift gear from studying views on natural resources to taking part in a community effort to lift an ensorcelling, especially when the researcher is the one who has been bewitched (Trigger, 2013). It follows that not only the “data” that corresponds to one’s initial research questions but the wealth of (often exhaustive) experiences lived out in the field are recorded as part of one’s field notes (Sanjek, 1990; Sanjek & Tratner, 2015); as one of my graduate school teachers repeatedly exhorted: “just write *everything* down.”

Field notes are then recrafted into yet another written form: the ethnography. While traditionally ethnographies aimed to holistically represent a “culture,” over the last three or

four decades, it has been generally recognized that such an aim is impossible (Clifford & Marcus, 1984) and contemporary ethnographies consist of detailed, in-depth descriptions and analyses of *particular* cultural or social features, based on the material collected through the fieldwork process. A close marriage between field data and a conceptual framework is pivotal to good scholarship, with many ethnographers emphasizing the importance of the give and take or “dialectical tacking back and forth” between the general and the particular that are necessary to achieve it (Geertz, 1973; 1979).

What emerges out of this practice is the tight-knit relationship between field observations and theory. Concepts can be tried out in advance, but the nature of one’s interactions in the field determine whether it is gender, class, or embodiment (or all three) that become the most salient rubric for analyzing social dynamics and cultural phenomena. But in an educational and financial environment that emphasizes forward-planning, this open-ended method of analysis is also one of the most difficult to teach. As Peggy Golde has noted, “The student often reads an ethnography as a *fait accompli* with no clear idea of how the picture of another culture was achieved, and with an inadequate grasp of the process of interaction between researcher and community members and of the problems, pitfalls, and procedures” involved (1986, p. 1). Arguably, however, some glimmer of how this “picture” is achieved is the most important lesson for undergraduate (and graduate) students to grasp, as it both makes theory come alive and reveals concepts for what they are: a tool for understanding empirical events that can be powerful for reconfiguring how we see the world, but that nonetheless remains one of many tools that offer up a range of perspectives on the nature of human society, social relations, cultural values, and power (hooks, 1994; Freire, 1993). So, how to make the fluid and open-ended nature of fieldwork amenable to 12-week teaching term, where ethnographic research methods are just one of a range of learning objectives?

### **Teaching Fieldwork, 50 Minutes at a Time**

In order to address this question, I have devised an assignment based on a 50 minute “mini ethnography,” reflecting not only the 50 minute lecture period students attend twice a week, but also the average amount of time I envisage they should spend “immersed” in the field in order to complete this task. Students are given the job of choosing a feature of social life that they can easily and unobtrusively observe in a public place. Specifically, they are instructed to imagine themselves as an anthropologist from another country, reporting on a significant phenomenon they have observed in their “field site.” As the assignment instructions relate:

You are a social-cultural anthropologist who lives in the (make believe) land of Qwerty. You have received funding from the Qwerty Association for Social Anthropology (QASA) to conduct one year of ethnographic fieldwork in Auckland, New Zealand.

You have just completed your first month of fieldwork and QASA requires that you send them back an initial report describing your ethnographic findings so far. You can choose any one of a variety of different aspects of social/cultural life in Auckland to cover in your report (for example, kinship, food, economics, sports, etc.) but you must focus on

one (and only one) area. You will be marked on both your ethnographic description and your analysis – remember that a good ethnography contains both of these elements (Trnka, 2012).

To assist them in their undertaking, students are not only given an introduction to basic fieldwork methods but also are given a list of possible concepts they might want to use in their analysis. I also devised an in-class workshop that leads them through the process of how to “de-familiarize” their well-known environment, learning to see cultural artefacts and social relations with new eyes, through the help of the now famous anthropological text, “Body Ritual among the Nacirema” by Horace Miner (1956).

“Nacirema culture,” Miner tells us, “is characterized by a highly developed market economy which has evolved in a rich natural habitat. While much of the people’s time is devoted to economic pursuits, a large part of the fruits of these labors and a considerable portion of the day are spent in ritual activity, ... [t]he focus of [which] is the human body...” (Miner, 1956, p. 503). Miner then dives into a description of “mouth-rites” that take place over a bathroom sink (1956, p. 503). While originally intended to engage American students in an examination of their own ethnocentrism (cf. Ferraro, 2004) – “Nacirema,” after all, is “American” spelled backwards, something that many, but not all, of my students discover as they read along – Miner’s essay also has the effect of showing how a different interpretive lens can make even the most mundane, familiar scene (brushing one’s teeth, for example) worthy of examination (cf. Spiro, 1990).

With these practical and conceptual tools in hand, students initiate their own mini-fieldwork projects. Over the years, I have been struck by the diverse settings they have chosen to locate their investigations, from university dorms, food courts, and bus stops to churches and synagogues, soccer fields, bars and pool halls. They have examined the gendered nature of sport, the meanings of consumption, and the constitution of transitory labor forces. They have looked at social dynamics in dance halls and considered how ethnic food can create a sense of belonging.

Once students settle on a topic, the next challenge they often face is coming to terms with what exactly an ethnography needs to encompass. Is it, some wonder, a bit like a blog? Or a different form of travel writing? (Spray, 2015). A key turning point for many students is recognizing that they are being asked not just to *describe* what they observe, but in the words of one of the course’s tutors, “to extrapolate from your observations to make some theoretical discussion about what you’re seeing, why and how is it produced and why it matters” (Spray, 2015, p. 17).

In many cases, the outcome is that students are compelled to grapple with not only aspects of Auckland’s social and cultural life that may have previously blended into the background of their lives, but also, and perhaps more importantly, with how researchers come to *theorize* the dynamics they encounter. It is one thing, for example, to describe spatial relations on a city sidewalk, and another to ask oneself whether these relations are determined primarily by class, gender, or ethnic identification. In the process, students

learn for themselves some the challenges and triumphs of attempting to portray and analyze the behavior they have observe (and, in their case, in 900 words or less).

This melding of first-hand experience and theory aims to make students more comfortable with using theoretical concepts to describe the world around them. It also prepares them to assess ethnographic research, enabling them to ask questions about what is and is not represented in the text and, as Golde advocates, to get behind the *making* of the text in order to gain an understanding of the *processes* of knowledge production. In subsequent assignments, I found that many students demonstrate a better grasp of how the positionality of the researcher (aspects such as one's gender or age, as well as one's pre-existing networks and cultural knowledge) can impact of the production of anthropological knowledge. There is also far less confusion over whether ethnographic research (and anthropology, more generally) can be relevant for understanding *all* societies. Going out and documenting social dynamics and cultural forms in their own neighborhoods compels students to reckon with how they themselves are encultured subjects; no longer can they assume that "culture" is something that only certain kinds of "other" (that is, ethnically- or nationally-marked) people have. As noted by a colleague who took over the course when my three year stint came to a close, the result of this exercise is that "many students found themselves 'exoticising the familiar' and, in the process, seeing their world in a fresh way, or discovering aspects of their culture that they had never before questioned" (Shore, 2015, p. 35).

Ethnographic fieldwork is a usually a long and multi-faceted process that rewards its practitioners through the unexpected insights it affords us into the complexities of human behavior. The 50 minute mini-ethnography cannot replicate the nuanced levels of understanding, and sometimes transformative effects (cf. Jackson, 2013), that fieldwork can engender. It does, however, enable students to become collaborators in the classroom (cf. Smith & Waller, 1997), setting their own research agendas, delving first-hand into research areas that they find meaningful, decentering their taken for granted assumptions about the behavior they are going to see and how to interpret it, and imbuing them with a new understanding of how knowledge can be produced through ethnographic methods.

Analyses of the pedagogical effects of engaging students in ethnographic methods at higher levels of learning have come to the conclusion that fieldwork and ethnographic writing are often challenging for students, in large part due to logistical difficulties such as limited time for collecting data, or concerns over ensuring researcher's safety (Stallings, 1995; Trujillo, 1999). Many educators, however, suggest that despite the challenges of teaching ethnography, it is a vital skill (Fetterman, 2010; Spradley, 2016). Hands-on ethnographic research is a powerful means of enabling students to concretely grasp an understanding of how culture and social relations shape behavior. Engaging students in ethnographic practice has also been noted for encouraging more creative and participatory approaches to knowledge production, including co-authorship and other collaborative endeavors between students and their research participants, as a key facet of any ethnographic inquiry is taking seriously the voices and perspectives of people in the communities in which we do research (Trujillo, 1999; see also Fetterman, 2010; Spradley, 2016).

While it is too much to expect that beginning students be able to grapple with the logistical and ethical complexities raised by undertaking multi-week ethnographic studies, I have argued here that there is much to be gained by adopting similar methodologies, albeit on a much smaller-scale, as part of first-year courses. Nor do these lessons need to be restricted to anthropology, as the mini-ethnography can be productively used across a range of disciplines as a way of encouraging students to observe a range of real-life interactions and assess the kinds of behavioral patterns and social dynamics that are revealed through them. Doing so opens up an important avenue for students to recognize the often implicit relationships between empirical data and theory – a powerful lesson across a range of academic contexts.

## References

- Anderson, K. (2009). Ethnographic research: A key strategy. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2009/03/ethnographic-research-a-key-to-strategy>. Accessed on May 30, 2016.
- Clifford, J., & Marcus, G. E., eds. (1986). *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Ferraro, G. (2004). Introduction to body ritual among the Nacirema. *Classic readings in cultural anthropology*. (1). Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Fetterman, D. M. (2010). *Ethnography step-by-step*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Freire, P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Geertz, C. (1973.) *The Interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. New York, NY: Basic Books, Inc.
- Geertz, C. (1979). From the native's point of view: On the nature of anthropological understanding. P. Rabinow & W.M. Sullivan (Eds.). *Interpretive social science*. (225-241). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Geertz, C. (1998). Deep hanging out. *New York Review of Books*, October 22.
- Golde, P. (1986). Introduction. P. Golde (Ed.) *Women in the field: Anthropological experiences*. (1-15). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- hooks, B. (1994.) *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Jackson, M. (2013). Suffering, selfhood and anthropological encounters. Shore, C., & Trnka, S. (Eds.). *Up close and personal: On peripheral perspectives and the production of anthropological knowledge*. (37-55). Oxford & New York: Berghahn Books.
- Malinowski, B. (1932). Introduction: Subject, method and scope of this inquiry. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. (1-25). London & New York: Routledge.
- Miner, H. (1956). Body ritual among the Nacirema. *American Anthropologist*, 58(3), 503-507.
- Sanjek, R., ed. (1990). *Fieldnotes: The making of anthropology*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Sanjek, R., & Tratner, S. W., eds. (2015). *eFieldnotes: The makings of anthropology in the digital world*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Shore, C. (2015). Fieldwork fundamentals: Ethnographic writing and anthropological analysis. Shore, C.. & Hagggar, S. (Eds). *Mundane events, big issues: Exploring eve-*

- ryday life in Auckland.* (23-28). Auckland: University of Auckland RAL-Student Publication Series.
- Shore, C., & Hagggar, S., eds. (2015). *Mundane events, big issues: Exploring everyday life in Auckland.* Auckland: University of Auckland RAL-Student Publication Series.
- Shore, C., & Trnka, S. (2013). Observing anthropologists: Professional knowledge, practice and lives. C. Shore & S. Trnka (Eds). *Up close and personal: On peripheral perspectives and the production of anthropological knowledge.* (1-33). Oxford & New York: Berghahn Books.
- Smith, K., & Waller, A. A. (1997). Afterword: New paradigms for college teaching. W. Campbell & K. Smith (Eds). *New paradigms for college teaching.* (269-281). Edina, MN: Interaction Book Company.
- Spiro, M. (1990). On the strange and the familiar in recent anthropological thought. J. W. Stigler, R.A. Shweder & G. Herdt (Eds). *Cultural psychology: Essays on comparative human development.* (47-61). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Spradley, J. (2016 [1979]). *The ethnographic interview.* Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.
- Spray, J. (2015). Prologue: The office hour. Shore, C., & Hagggar, S. (Eds). *Mundane events, big issues: Exploring everyday life in Auckland.* (17-21). Auckland: University of Auckland RAL-Student Publication Series.
- Stallings, W. (1995). Confessions of a quantitative educational researcher trying to teach qualitative research. *Educational Researcher*, 24(3), 31-32.
- Trnka, S. (2012). Mini ethnography (assignment instructions). Anthro 100, Human Cultures: Introduction to Social Anthropology. Auckland: University of Auckland.
- Trigger, D. (2013). Rethinking nature and nativeness. Shore, C., & Trnka, S. (Eds.). *Up close and personal: On peripheral perspectives and the production of anthropological knowledge.* (140-157). Oxford & New York: Berghahn Books.
- Trujillo, N. (1999). Teaching ethnography in the twenty-first century using collaborative learning. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 28(6), 705-719.