

INTRODUCTION:

SCHOOLING THE IMAGINATION

What is in this chapter?



- An introduction to ethnographic writing and its many strengths
- A brief explanation of why we have written this book
- A discussion of ethnography for/in/of/and education
- Some advice on how best to learn and develop ethnographic skills
- A vision for empathy as an ethnographic principle
- A guide to the structure of this book

Ethnography: being, seeing, writing

Being, seeing, writing. Simple participles that belie the complexity of their meanings. This book introduces the interwoven practices of methodological being, 'ways of seeing' (Berger 1972) and genres of writing that mark out the best ethnographic work in education. Whether encountering ethnography for the first time, using ethnographic methods in your own research, or exploring the diversity of approaches that trade under the 'Ethnography' label, this book is for you. It interprets 'education' in a broad sense to include learning in both formal and informal settings,

2 Ethnography in education

and offer an up-to-date and comprehensive overview of ethnographic research practices in Education. We show how different intellectual fields and traditions understand and use ethnography, and demonstrate its evolving strengths and contributions.

We see an ethnographic sensibility as offering the researcher and the reader unique insights into the educational worlds in which we all now live and into which we invest our hopes, desires and aspirations. These are worlds in which pedagogic policies, institutional discourses and individual ideals are increasingly mobile and dynamic. Previous educational certainties – state versus private, academic versus vocational, policy versus practice – are being replaced by complexity, ambiguity and fluidity. Ethnography provides a way of following these changes, and of communicating the stories that matter.

We live in self-reflexive times. We can no longer pretend that our research personae are separate from the places and contexts we seek to understand. Methods play a role in making the worlds we inhabit. Our insights get appropriated, reworked and transformed: they go places and become part of the messy realities of social life. Scholarly knowledge is never innocent or pure – it always comes with baggage. This is not necessarily a problem. Most ethnographers have thought about the way they shape the story they tell, and paid close attention to the way in which they, and their ideas, become part of the social world they study. This is particularly visible in the marked transformations in the genre over the last two or three decades, and in the way today's ethnographic narratives are crafted.

Education is a peculiar thing. Most people have had deep and lasting encounters with formal schooling and the way it disciplines the imagination and shapes bodies and emotions. But even if we can tell heartfelt tales of our own schooling, this doesn't make us all ethnographers. The ethnographer's challenge is to weave the immediacy and rawness of educational experiences into a context from which analytical patterns and insights can be discerned. The ethnographer uses literary genres – stories, vignettes and portraits – as part of this process. These stories are ethnographic narratives rather than raw retellings. They convey the vitality of those experiences within a framing that allows the reader to make connections and comparisons. If education is always risky, always unsettling, then ethnography is the perfect method to capture its dynamism and power.

No matter how intense these lived experiences, they can only be communicated through writing. This is the paradox that sustains the ethnographic project. We go as far as to suggest that there is no other method in which writing is such an integral aspect to the method. As Clifford Geertz, one of America's most celebrated anthropologists, once quipped, 'I think of myself as a writer who happens to be doing his writing in

Anthropology' (1991, 246). A century ago the term *ethnography* – literally writing the people – was the term adopted by anthropologists in the British Empire to describe a revolutionary new way of doing research, working with and living amongst one's 'informants'. Soon afterwards the term also became popular in American Sociology to describe fine-grained empirical studies of urban communities, a tradition that started at the University of Chicago. Ethnographic methods matured and developed within these national traditions of Anthropology and Sociology that developed during the twentieth century in Europe and North America.

Today ethnography comes in a variety of flavours. No longer solely the preserve of its original 'home' disciplines, it has developed distinctive brews across and beyond the social sciences. Even within Education, scholars mean rather different things when they use the term. Some see it as a deeply humanistic endeavour, creating knowledge through the everyday exchanges and dialogues of social life. Others define it in a more scientific way, seeing it as offering a rigorous and empiricist research method. Others take a more explicitly activist stance, defining ethnography in political terms, using it to imagine research that is less hierarchical and exploitative. Some see ethnography's strength as its focus on people and lived experiences in schools and classrooms, whilst others use ethnographic approaches to study educational texts, policies, discourses, ideas and ideologies. The method has gone 'viral' beyond the university, and many companies now employ 'ethnographers' to do research or to inform their design processes. Popular representations and caricatures of ethnographic practice increasingly crop up in TV reality shows and everyday cultures, to the extent that one could feasibly claim that 'we're all ethnographers now'. This book conveys this rich smorgasbord of ethnographic traditions and understandings.

Three ethnographic principles

We want to encourage the reader to experiment with different types of ethnographic practice and writing. But we also stake out our own epistemological positions. Three broad principles orient our approach to ethnography. The first is that we view ethnography as a way of being, seeing, thinking and writing. For us, it is not just another 'tool' or method for social research, but rather a way of thinking about social research that brings together a range of methods under a shared disposition. Far from 'switching off' at the end of the day or after an interview, some scholars feel that the ethnographic 'habit' defines their whole persona.

4 Ethnography in education

So what is an ethnographic habit or disposition? Our second principle is that ethnographic work should aim to be an ‘uncomfortable science’ (Firth 1951), an approach to research that is a little unconventional, a little exposed. The first colonial anthropologists who left their shady verandahs and cosy library armchairs to live and work with people would have felt this discomfort. For many ethnographers, the key protagonist of this vision was Bronislaw Malinowski. His stylishly written account of a complex exchange ritual in the South Pacific Trobriand Islands, entitled ‘Argonauts of the Western Pacific’ (1922), was written during an enforced extended sojourn during the First World War. His choice to put up a tent in the middle of a local village symbolised for him the best way to capture ‘the imponderabilia of everyday life’. An avowed self-publicist, his catchily titled monographs popularised the ethnographic method. Much later on, the posthumous publication of his diary (Malinowski 1967) revealed his loneliness, neuroses and prejudices.

His struggles with his own inner worlds highlight the emotional dislocation that accompanies any social research that strives towards subjective understanding. There is a German philosophical tradition that asks whether and how one can best understand (*verstehen*) the subjective experience of others. At around the same time the sociologist Max Weber was writing about this aspiration to communicate meaning: he and Malinowski were near contemporaries. A century later, the question remains. Is it possible to be deeply and fully immersed in a situation and at the same time to stand back and make sense of it? As an influential feminist philosopher of science notes, ‘ethnography is not so much a specific procedure in anthropology as it is a method of being at risk in the face of the practices and discourses into which one inquires’ (Haraway 1999, 190). For us, being ‘at risk’ means being exposed to the profound complexities of the social and educational worlds of which ethnographic researchers are a part. It involves questioning the things others take for granted, making the familiar strange, not jumping to conclusions. But don’t we all aspire to these virtues? In an age where emotional intelligence and self-insight are marketable social attributes, delineating what makes for a distinctively *ethnographic* approach to being reflective (or what is now called reflexivity) is tricky.

This leads us to our third principle – that ethnography demands empathy. If ethnography is an approach to scholarship that puts one emotionally at risk, then it also involves empathy, understood as the ability to understand and be attentive to the feelings of another on their terms. This does not mean condoning or seeking to justify political positions that one finds disagreeable or even irrational. It simply involves recognising that this tension exists. Creating ethnographic knowledge through

empathetic dialogue, exchange and collaboration is hard work. It brings emotional and intellectual risks but can also be accompanied by profound insights. We return to our understanding of ethnographic empathy in the chapters that follow. It underscores our argument that ethnography is an embodied practice that uses all our senses and emotional sensibilities.

The remainder of this introduction begins this task of helping students navigate their way in a complex and changing scholarly landscape. We reveal more about our own initiation into this field, reflect on the best way to learn ethnographic skills, and think further about the relationship between ethnography and education.

Ethnography 'in', 'of', 'and' or 'for' Education?

Who remembers their first day of school? One's first encounters – and the tastes and smells that went with it – tend to be etched on most people's memory. David's first day of ethnographic research in a Ugandan secondary school was no different, as this ethnographic vignette seeks to capture:

Across Uganda the first Monday of each February ... pupils who have received the results of the nation-wide Primary Leaving Exam (PLE) arrive at secondary schools in freshly-starved bewilderment. The school year at Kikomera Senior Secondary School (SSS), a school in a small town 50 miles north of Kampala, may have already begun, but it is an apprehensive first day for the new Standard One pupils, and their new English teacher – me. I've had more than my fair share of first days, but am still nervous, for lesson plans and homework marking have been timetabled to clash with double ethnographic diary-writing. The new students might well have arrived to enrol with the requisite 12 exercise books plus hoe; but I clutch my wittily perceptive letter of permission from the District Education Officer to the Headmaster. 'He would like to teach in your school to familiarise himself with the cultural set up – please timetable him.' (Mills 1999a, 3)

This vignette, taken from an article based on first fieldwork experiences, seeks to capture the influence of first impressions of a Ugandan school. It situates the ethnographer and the reader within the research, whilst also introducing the school that acts as the case study for the account. Drawing together a range of different fieldnotes and materials, this passage was rewritten and condensed many times in the months that followed field research. The passage sought to leaven strangeness with familiarity, to find a way of changing scale. The ambition was to find a

6 Ethnography in education

way to knot together experiences of national policies, district governance and everyday educational practices within the school. The aim was taut, analytically vivid and readable insights that mark out good ethnographic writing. The role of the writer is to help the reader quickly locate and understand his role in the school and in the text, but also to convey the expectations and implications of the 'high-stakes' academic assessment system that dominates Ugandan education. There is also a hint of the material expectations placed upon students. This later develops into a discussion of school fees and teacher salaries. There is much left unsaid in this short passage. Yet there is also a glimpse of the 'ethnographic imagination' at work, one guided and informed by more than a year spent living and working at the school, teaching, attending staff-meetings and hanging out with other teachers.

Ethnographic vignettes, interspersed with analysis and theory, are one way for ethnographers to write about education. But there are other ethnographies of education, and other possible relationships. A feminist researcher interested in gender production in the playground is going to adopt different research methods, and have different findings, from a teacher-practitioner ethnographer interested in the identities of trainee teachers. These will differ again from a critical ethnographic account of audit culture and higher education policy. Not all ethnographers will want or need to present a holistic picture of a school or university, or wish to link what happens within an institution to larger social processes. Linguistic anthropologists might be interested primarily in classroom talk and language turn-taking, or perhaps an analysis of discourse in the special-needs classroom. Some will be highly critical of educational processes, whilst others will be seeking to improve them. Ethnographies of French schools may have little relevance for studying universities in Uganda. Each has its place. Rather than try and encompass the whole diverse field of 'ethnography and education', the onus is on the researcher is to develop a sense of different histories of ethnographic practice, and to map their own vision of the key literature and central debates in relation to the topic under investigation.

Education is a generative site for ethnographic research. It is also a place in which ethnography can be put to work, as the last chapter of this book demonstrates. Drawing on a range of examples we encourage you to think about how you might use ethnographic methods and insights in your own everyday teaching or professional practice. Every ethnography *of* education also has insights *for* educators. Most ethnographers are also teachers, and so are able to put their insights to use *in* education and in their teaching practices. The final chapter demonstrates how ethnographers put their

skills and research insights to work in a variety of different ways within educational settings.

About the authors

This book is a product of our own experiences of encountering and learning about ethnography. We both ‘discovered’ ethnographic writing as undergraduates, carried out ethnographic research for our doctorate, and remain passionate about the method and its potential. But we still puzzle over how best to teach and communicate ethnographic practice. Through our own writing, we have developed our own ethnographic imagination, and see it as informing our approach to research. We have gone on to teach ethnographic methods and to supervise research students who use these methods to investigate educational questions.

Writing a textbook makes one think about the books that formed one’s own thinking. Reflecting on our own training, we began to appreciate the different national and disciplinary methodological traditions within which ethnography is sustained and communicated. For Missy, studying qualitative research in Education in the US, her entrée into ethnographic work was via the sociological training of Robert Bogdan and Sari Knopp Biklen (1992, 2007). Brought up in the Chicago sociological tradition, her training involved reading a wide range of ethnographic monographs and carrying out a range of structured ethnographic observations. This was coupled with detailed feedback on her fieldnotes and analytical memos, as well as careful discussion of initial attempts at analysis. This careful attention to one’s daily ethnographic chores is often overlooked. One contribution of this volume is to draw attention to these techniques and skills.

For David, studying Anthropology in the UK, there was relatively little formal methods training. The Malinowskian founding myth meant that the ethnographic method was largely taken for granted. In retrospect, this became a potentially noxious pedagogic brew of intellectual confidence and methodological vagueness. The focus of his teachers was on communicating disciplinary and regional traditions (Fardon 1990) of ethnographic writing, on absorbing the exemplars of anthropological elders, and on anticipating the vagaries and uncertainties of fieldwork. With his fellow students, he was more concerned about the implications of postmodern and postcolonial theory for the very survival of the anthropological project. These debates seemed to profoundly question the nature of anthropological authority and the very possibility of reliable ethnographic representation (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Clifford

8 Ethnography in education

1988). The academic foundations of anthropology seemed increasingly insecure, and many students developed severe cases of ethnographic angst and writer's block. They wondered what accidents of history and privilege gave them the right to represent and make truth claims about social worlds very different from their own. The debates have moved on. Most ethnographers now acknowledge that the politics of representation are complex and unavoidable, and tackling them is an integral step on one's methodological journey.

Each pedagogy, if one can call them that, had its strengths and weaknesses. This book is an opportunity to learn from those experiences and to provide the guidebook we might have wished for on our own ethnographic journey. As a student, one only dimly understands the politics and practicalities of knowledge production. Why were there such different disciplinary embodiments and understandings of the ethnographic method? Why do teachers either shy away from teaching (and even talking about) methods, or talk about them endlessly? More than a decade later, the theoretical and methodological literature on ethnographic research has burgeoned, but the disagreements persist. Some feel that too much attention to method is a distraction, some that we need to pay more attention. This book will guide you through these debates, suggesting that these differences and conflicts offer highly productive entrées into the issues that matter. It points you to the very best ethnographic writing and contemporary resources, as well as offering key critical tools.

Can I be taught ethnography?

How does one learn the skills of ethnographic research? Can one even be taught such skills? Some anthropological ethnographers continue to argue that methods courses and textbooks risk imposing a one-size-fits-all approach, downplaying the contingencies, uncertainties and anxieties that stimulate the ethnographic imagination. Instead, they would say, one learns by example, through reading, listening and writing. An influential advocate of methodological reform, George Marcus (2009, 3) suggests that anthropology is 'less a matter of training in method' than of participating in a 'culture of craftsmanship'. Rather than focus on training, Marcus calls for 'method' to be rethought at an epistemological level, and for us to pay more attention to changing our 'metamethods', namely 'the norms of professional culture that shape the actual form of research' (ibid., 4).

It is an appealing if somewhat elitist vision. Not every budding ethnographer can benefit from the heady atmospheres of departments

grounded in sociological and anthropological research traditions. Not every student can absorb the wisdom of the elders through intellectual apprenticeships. Those studying and teaching in Education departments have to make the case for ethnography amidst competing intellectual paradigms. When these rivals coolly insist that quantitative 'evidence', 'generalisability' and statistical 'significance' are key, becoming an ethnographer can feel like a retreat into unscientific generalisations and subjectivity. How does one respond to what feels like the unanswerable question: 'Is your work representative?'

A response is required. In the UK, a close-knit community of educational ethnographers have advocated a robust and explicit empiricism. The best-selling textbook by Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, now in its third edition (1983, 1995, 2007), has done a great deal to promote this version of ethnography. Whilst acknowledging the iterative, uncertain nature of ethnography, they nonetheless adopt a didactic approach to social research, foregrounding rigour, process and accountability. In his provocatively titled *What's Wrong with Ethnography?*, Hammersley makes the case that the goals of ethnographic analysis need rethinking (1992, 28). In Chapter 2 we discuss Hammersley and Atkinson's influential manifesto further. Vexed by the way that anthropological monographs seem to ignore questions of method, they insist on the importance of thinking about research design at every stage of a project.

A problem facing any methods text is that books have beginnings and ends. Their linear structure neatly lulls the unsuspecting reader into thinking that research potentially could proceed in a similarly straightforward fashion. One starts with a research question, develops a research design and then proceeds to 'collect' and analyse one's 'data'. But what if your experience of ethnographic fieldwork not only forces reflection, but leads you to rethink the very research question and design? Can one ever be prescriptive about a method that depends so much on how the researcher responds to the world in which they find themselves?

The answer to whether one can be taught ethnography depends on how one understands teaching. We seek to find a middle way between the extremes of a 'sink or swim' pedagogy and methodological prescriptivism. We draw on our own experiences of learning and unlearning to make the case for developing one's ethnographic imagination and an empathy for these different traditions. To help our readers on this journey, we do this through extensive readings, case studies and practical exercises.

Ethnography takes time. And time can sometimes feel like a precious asset in today's educational settings and fast-changing world. Classically,

10 Ethnography in education

anthropological fieldwork involved spending a year or more in one place. Even if this isn't always possible, this book is intended to provide something of an introduction to the intellectual 'ambience' that characterises research training in anthropology, the discipline that has arguably done most to champion ethnography, and a field whose intellectual currency remains the full-length monograph. One 'short cut' is to spend time reading some of these classic texts, and we feel strongly that students should read and critically assess a range of educational ethnographic monographs. To help you, this book offers annotated further readings and resources at the end of each chapter, including introductory methods texts and region-focused texts that you might not otherwise encounter.

What sort of ethnographer are you?

How much influence do you have over the epistemological assumptions that inform your work? If you are a student, it may be less than you think. Academic departments are often grounded in a shared intellectual tradition and set of methodological expectations. You may not fully realise what these assumptions are. Even if you do, it is hard to reject the advice of others or doggedly insist that you can plough your own furrow. It is equally challenging to argue for a form of activist ethnography in a department that has historically been suspicious of action research. Or to pursue participatory research in a department that is used to observational approaches. Working in a field involves being 'disciplined' within that field's intellectual tradition. The key to working creatively within these constraints is to understand as much as possible about the tradition in which you find yourself, and why seniors, supervisors and colleagues in your 'epistemic community' (Knorr-Cetina 1999) take and defend the views they do.

Much like moving house, arriving in a new academic department as a student involves getting to know the neighbours. You will want to make sense of this new intellectual 'home'. A good way of doing this is by finding out more about the institutional and intellectual history of the place. If there is an ethnographic tradition, what part has it played in the history of the department? Who have been its key protagonists? Which work is repeatedly re-read and cited? Who are its key influences and what have they published? This 'locality work' is particularly important for those studying within a multidisciplinary field like Education. Look out too for points of disagreement: not everyone will have the same

views about writing in the first person, or using ethnographic portraits. It may soon become clear that there is not one 'approved' way to do ethnographic research. Providing one can justify one's approach, there may indeed be space to innovate and be creative in your approach and writing.

Can one be too explicit about method? If anthropologists have taken their method for granted, is it equally possible to spend too much time accounting for one's methodological choices? Textbooks, even this one, risk encouraging what the influential Harvard psychologist Gordon Allport disparaged as 'methodolatry', the replacement of 'big questions' by 'neat little studies'. More recently, Denzin and Lincoln defined methodolatry as 'a preoccupation with selecting and defending methods to the exclusion of the actual substance of the story being told' (Denzin and Lincoln 2005, 48).

It is important not to put the methodological cart before the interpretive horse. Academics specialise in specialisation. It is all too easy to become overly focused on getting one's chosen method 'just right'. At worst, your method becomes more important than the question you seek to understand. This can lead to 'methods' becoming a field of disciplinary expertise in itself, with its own journals and debates, semi-detached from substantive concerns. Does this matter? A potential risk is that it promotes methodologically accountable but ultimately unimaginative research. Remember to think about method as a reflective space in which to reflect on your research dilemmas, not as a set of rules or directions to be followed. This is all the more important when the object of ethnographic study is difficult to define. As Law comments in *After Method*, 'while standard methods are often extremely good at what they do, they are badly adapted to the study of the ephemeral, the indefinite and the irregular' (2004, 3). One could not get a better description of the stuff worthy of ethnographic pursuit. It is a reminder that the ethnographic imagination is hard to standardise.

What's special about this book?

This book sits on a library bookshelf or catalogue surrounded by others with similar names and themes. But what if didactic ethnographic methods textbooks are part of the problem, rather than part of the solution? Can they ever communicate what the best anthropological ethnographies so convincingly achieve, namely the power of writing to connect the representation of social experience with scholarly analysis? Many of these

12 Ethnography in education

books argue the case for ‘their’ way of doing ethnographic research, privileging one version of its history or methodological approach. As Neve and Unnithan-Kumar note, ‘there is never just one answer to an ethnographic exploration, never only one way of interpreting ethnographic data, and never just one way of being an anthropologist’ (2006, 19). We tend to agree.

Does it matter that there may be as many ways of being ethnographic as there are ethnographers? We suggest not. Perhaps there can never be one ‘right’ way when the method is partly defined by the embodied practice of the ethnographer themselves. It is a way of thinking about social research that brings together a range of methods under a shared disposition towards the world. Ethnographers can do more to help readers understand ‘their’ version by demonstrating its links to particular disciplinary traditions and approaches. *Ethnography in Education* will introduce you to the range of such approaches – and their epistemologies – used to study Education, as well as the core differences that divide scholars. As anthropological debates about fieldwork practice and method are little known in many Education departments, we make a point of highlighting the early – and ongoing – contribution of anthropological ideas to ethnographic debates.

Ethnographic researchers employ a range of methods, from textual analysis to basic quantitative approaches. It is not just ‘deep hanging out’ (Geertz 1998). Nor is it ‘just’ the study of culture. They may well decide to count things, to carry out interviews, to analyse documents, even to conduct surveys. Today they are as likely to study social networks, transnational political movements, intergovernmental policies, or new knowledge assemblages – from genes to financial markets. Despite the mythology of the fearless ‘lone ethnographer’ (see Galman 2007), they are unlikely to work alone. They actively create shared knowledge with their research participants and collaborate in multidisciplinary teams. In a ‘knowledge economy’ full of symbolic analysts, some seek to do analytical work with their participants. Others are committed activists and see research as a political act. There is almost no limit to the possibilities that the method opens up.

In Education, the best ethnographies conjure up vivid and lively descriptions of classroom and school dynamics. They bring places and people alive for the readers in other places and times. Yet much of what determines the shape of learning lies far outside the classroom. There are a whole range of ethnographic writing genres that tend not to be discussed in textbooks, and the act of writing is something we return to again and again.

For all the common interests, there are also marked differences amongst scholars in their understandings of ethnography. Where do these disagreements lie? There are three big unspoken disagreements, each of which has implications for the design and practice of ethnographic research. The first is how ethnographers understand the relationship between observation and participation. Some traditions prioritise detached systematic observation; others feel embodied participation is key. The second disagreement is over how one conceptualises the ethnographic 'field' and one's relationship to it. Is the field a bounded physical site, a set of social relationships, or a conceptual and metaphorical space? The final difference is in how scholars relate to the method at an embodied, emotional level. Some, especially anthropological ethnographers, feel so attached to ethnographic ways of seeing and being that these become an existential part of their academic (and even non-academic) identity. Others are much less emotionally attached to the method, and are more pragmatic, treating ethnography as another tool in their methodological tool-box. As these divisions cut to the heart of ethnographic research design, we discuss them at length in Chapters 2 and 3.

Where does this book stand? Whilst wary of romanticising the ethnographic persona, there is an intellectual coherence to seeing ethnographic techniques, writing and analysis as intimately connected. Paul Willis writes about the importance of cultivating an 'ethnographic imagination', a view we share. Writing is the key to bringing this imagination to life, to making analytical sense of experience. We return repeatedly to the importance of imaginative and accessible writing – in a range of genres – for communicating ethnographic insights.

Ethnographic empathy

Imagine being invited to a party where you know no one. One has to feel brave to enter a room full of strangers and strike up a rewarding conversation. It is much more fun to share an in-joke with one's peers and friends. Ethnographers are no different, even if anthropology has long made a virtue of engaging with radically different ways of knowing and being. Difference emerges in unexpected moments. In Britain for example, middle-class researchers can find it hard to understand working-class attitudes to education, as Gillian Evans describes in her puzzlement over attitudes to what she saw as 'educational failure' in south London (2007). By the same token, it is easier to read and engage with work that

14 Ethnography in education

shares one's intellectual tastes than to work at understanding very different disciplinary presuppositions. Even small communities of ethnographers can talk past each other.

In response, the book makes the case for what we call 'methodological empathy'. Even though Geertz famously questioned the possibility of 'inner correspondence of spirit with your informants' (Geertz 1974, 29), the ambition to gain subjective understanding or *verstehen* continues to motivate most ethnographic work, and remains an implicit aspect of participant-observation or 'insider' research.

But *verstehen* needs to be repatriated to the academy. Academics often spend too little time understanding each other. Universities are full of artefactual disputes and intellectual bunkers. Part of our purpose is to argue for greater methodological and epistemological empathy between ethnographers of different stripes.

Some, especially in an American tradition of cultural anthropology, have championed cultural relativism as a necessary methodological tool. A strong relativist position presumes the independent existence of moral worlds where very different standards apply. This is analytically questionable, and one can quickly get tied up in ethical knots. All ethical and moral positions are contingent, located in particular contexts. Less absolutist positions are more useful. These include what can be called 'methodological relativism', the art of what we call 'wilful ingenuousness and the momentary suspension of disbelief' (Mills 2003, 31) in understanding other ways of being in the world. This 'momentary' relativism can be invaluable at certain reflective moments of fieldwork, a useful counterweight to snap judgements and hurried reactions.

Ethnographers are unlikely to cultivate a relativism about their methodological choices. However, an empathetic approach to understanding the reasons for why other scholars make different epistemological presumptions and use contrasting toolkits is a vital aspect of scholarship. This idea of methodological empathy is one we develop in subsequent chapters.

How is this book organised?

The book begins and ends with a discussion of ethnographic writing. This emphasis on writing is deliberate. Whilst the book goes on to discuss 'performative ethnographies' and the role of visual media, it is primarily through writing that ethnographers think, organise and communicate ethnographic experience and analysis. The remaining

chapters tackle aspects of ethnographic research that are the subject of ongoing debate, that deserve particular thought and care, or have been neglected in existing texts. These include developing an understanding of the ways ethnographers conceive of research design (Chapter 2), the different meanings they give to the 'field', fieldwork and their research relationship (Chapter 3), how they take fieldnotes and analyse them (Chapter 4), new spaces and ethnographic approaches (Chapter 5), how scholars bring together theory and ethnography in their analysis and writing (Chapter 6), and ways in which ethnographers are doing research differently (Chapter 7). Chapter 8 comes back to writing, exploring the range of writing practices that ethnographers engage in and innovative ways of taking ethnography to broader audiences. The Conclusion takes up the question of how to use your ethnographic experiences, and cultivate an ethnographic sensibility, in your own professional practice. Each chapter also offers an in-depth reading of one or more educational ethnographies to illustrate its themes.

There are some things this book does not do. It does not aspire to be a self-contained 'how-to' handbook. Nor does it discuss the practical aspects of the methods that one might use as part of one's ethnographic research. Where there are already excellent guides to research interviewing, participant-observation, life history or documentary analysis, there is little point in repeating their insights. The book offers annotated reviews of relevant further reading at the end of each chapter, intended to point you to the best of this work. There is also a huge range of resources available online and in the journals; again, these are highlighted and reviewed. Like the best guidebooks, the aim is to take the reader to interesting and stimulating places. It is then up to you what you do there.

There are several aspects of this book that are novel. One is the careful discussion of extracts of ethnographic writing, along with examples of exemplary educational ethnographies. More importantly, this book is designed to complement rather than repeat the insights offered in existing guidebooks to ethnographic research, focusing primarily on issues that many of these books tend to ignore. Third, the book offers a critical evaluation – and appreciation – of seemingly new ways of thinking about and conducting ethnographic research, especially those that require full use of all our senses. Finally, we aim to help the reader prepare for the ethical questions that accompany ethnographic practice. In every chapter we seek to provide practical research advice as well as vignettes and case studies.

Conclusion: schooling the ethnographic imagination

During two years spent carrying out research in Uganda, David became increasingly curious about the moral hierarchies that the students and teachers in a rural school created around education. As he wrote in an article published shortly afterwards: ‘Why is Kikomera SSS described – somewhat dismissively – by its teachers as a “Third World” school, despite contemporary national discourses and state practices viewing education as the key path to “development” and “modernization”?’ (Mills 1999a, 14). Was it a well-developed sense of irony or incisive sociological insight that led the teachers to label the well-resourced urban schools as ‘First World’? What were the consequences for students and teachers at Kikomera? Was it ever possible to feel successful or rewarded in such contexts? Education creates moral worlds that at once liberate and constrain.

Across the world, education is now all about the struggle to make one’s aspirations and desires real. Ethnography is the ideal way to access and describe these possibilities and the institutional structures that get built around them. But schooling one’s ethnographic imagination takes time. Along the way there is much to read, lots to learn and many mistakes to make.

Don’t be too ambitious. Remember that whilst writing is a powerful form of communication, it can never fully encompass experience. In ever more complex systems and social worlds, we have to strive to find new and creative ways to capture this experience, even where words fail us. As John Berger noted, ‘it is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it’ (1972, 7). The book returns repeatedly to questions of how to read and how to write. There is no easy shortcut to developing one’s own ethnographic voice.

It is best to think of your own research experiences and attempts at ethnographic writing as a stage on this journey into a fascinating intellectual tradition. It is a journey best carried out with fellow travellers, as sources of feedback, critique and support. *Ethnography in Education* is much more than a ‘how-to’ textbook. It is a guidebook for a journey through different ethnographic traditions, and the intense loyalties they generate around ‘their’ methods and approaches. The chapters are full of insights into the rich diversity of ethnographic practices, leavened with methodological empathy and political sensitivity. This book, with all its resources, is intended to accompany you en route. If this book helps to school, discipline and focus your ‘ethnographic imagination’ (Willis 2000), it will have served its purpose.

Exercises



- Find out more about the research training that your own supervisors or teachers received, and how they now view and remember this training. They might be willing to be interviewed about this topic. This would be an excellent way to learn interviewing skills, and would help you understand the disciplinary socialisation they received as new researchers.
- Write a short (1000-word) portrait of your own personal educational journey to this point. Try to be as frank and honest as possible. Pay particular attention to critical events and significant moments, describing how these have shaped your intellectual likes and dislikes. Compare these with colleagues. Then explore the following questions:
 - Why and how do your accounts differ?
 - How much have you emphasised the role of family, friends and institutions?
 - How have you portrayed your own agency in this story?
 - How does it feel to be critically honest about one's desire and hopes?
 - To what extent does the account seek to theorise these experiences?

By doing this, you will quickly see how ethnographic writing can be very personal, and why people's own experiences are integral to the ethnographies they produce.

Readings and resources



Each chapter in this volume provides an annotated bibliography for further reading and thematic exploration. To complement the introductory chapter, we offer a more extended set of general readings and resources. We begin with four recently published introductions to ethnographic work, all of which combine a fresh and innovative approach with thoughtful reflections. We go on to suggest core reference texts and a range of web-based resources.

Galman, S. C. (2007). *Shane the Lone Ethnographer*. Lanham, Md., AltaMira Press.

Whimsical, amusing and instructive, this is the first (and only?) introduction to ethnography written in the style of a cowboy comic. Sally Galman is an

18 Ethnography in education

anthropologist based in a School of Education, and her witty drawings of Shane's first ethnographic adventure perfectly capture the highs and lows of social research. Behind the jokey style, there is lots of sensible advice for those doing ethnographic research in educational settings for the first time. Whilst written for a US context, it is the perfect leaven to the more dour methods texts in the field of Education. Occasionally a little didactic, but mostly a great read.

Madden, R. (2010). *Being ethnographic: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Ethnography*. Los Angeles; London, Sage.

A thoughtful and articulate explication of ethnography from an Australian anthropologist who admits to never having 'made much of the distinction between qualitative sociology and anthropology'. As a result, Madden has written one of the few guides that combines an attention to both 'thinking about' and doing ethnography. Attentive to ethnography's different histories, Madden is at home discussing ethnographic classics and contemporary debates, and the book leavens practical research advice with reflective asides about his own research on the Aboriginal community in his home town. His aim is to 'articulate "doing" and "thinking" into a logical whole', an approach that Madden calls 'being ethnographic'. It is an appealing and coherent vision, and is perhaps the best single-volume introduction to ethnography. The book is complemented by an up-to-date list of selected readings.

Murchison, J. M. (2010). *Ethnography Essentials: Designing, Conducting, and Presenting Your Research*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

A comprehensive, accessible and straightforward beginner's guide to ethnographic research, Murchison draws on his Tanzanian anthropological research experience to guide the reader through each stage. Written in clear and didactic style, particularly useful are chapters on writing research proposals, on ethnographic maps, tables and charts, and on analysing cultural artifacts. Each chapter has learning objectives and discussion questions. The chapter sub-headings (such as 'What do I need to write down?' and 'Shall I write it down immediately?') are helpfully reassuring and sensible, if a bit 'teacherly' at some points.

O'Reilly, K. (2011). *Ethnographic Methods*. London; New York, Routledge.

This is the second edition of a measured introduction by a qualitative sociologist who has done research with the British expatriate community in Spain. Written for undergraduates, it is gently paced and encouraging, with lots of guidance on participatory research, on ethnographic interviews,

focus groups and using visual materials. It also offers thoughtful readings of key theorists and a history of anthropology. She recognises that ‘qualitative research is as often art as science’ and admits ‘I cannot tell you what to do but only what choices there are and how others have resolved various problems’ (p. 4). A thoughtful and sympathetic guide, somewhat less didactic than Murchison.

Recommended reference texts



Anderson-Levitt, K. M., (ed) (2011). *Anthropologies of education: A Global Guide to Ethnographic Studies of Learning and Schooling*. Oxford, Berghahn.

This is less of an introductory handbook than a chapter-by-chapter review of different national histories of ethnographic research of Education. It usefully highlights European debates and other traditions beyond the Anglophone world of the US and the UK. A good way to situate one’s work in relation to these national debates.

Atkinson, P., Delamont, S., Coffey, A., Lofland, J. and Lofland, L. (eds) (2007). *Handbook of Ethnography*. London, Sage.

If you are in need of a compendious bible and reference source on all matters ethnographic, then look no further. This authoritative five-hundred page handbook has thirty-three well-written chapters that weave together accounts of the different US and UK ethnographic traditions, reviews of ethnographic research in a range of substantive areas (including education) and advice on the practicalities of ethnographic research and analysis. Each chapter comes with a fulsome, if not exhaustive, bibliography. Atkinson and Delamont are also the editors of *Representing Ethnography*, an even more voluminous four-volume Sage benchmark publication that brings together a comprehensive collection of influential writing in the field.

Levinson, B. A. and Pollock, M. (eds) (2011). *A Companion to the Anthropology of Education*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

This reader offers an excellent cutting-edge introduction to the range of different approaches taken by ethnographers and anthropologists working on education, with a particular focus on the vibrant US scholarly community. Rather than take the field for granted, the editors ask the contributors one central question: where and what and when is ‘education’ to anthropologists? The contributions offer many – and sometimes divergent – answers.

20 Ethnography in education

All of the thirty-two specially written chapters address this question in some way, whether through a discussion of the history of the field, through an attention to language, or to politics, or to experiences or hands-on interventions. This reader highlights the many different stories one can tell about the nature of the field in the US, its theoretical and applied traditions, its boundaries and its seeming marginalisation within the broader discipline.

Levinson, B. A. et al. (eds) (2000). *Schooling the Symbolic Animal: Social and Cultural Dimensions of Education*. Lanham, Md.; Oxford, Rowman & Littlefield.

This is a judicious and stimulating sourcebook for those new to the anthropological study of education, and brings together a century of writing and two dozen influential anthropologists and sociologists. The 'Foundations' section ranges widely, and includes pieces from Emile Durkheim, Margaret Mead, Raymond Williams and Clifford Geertz. Subsequent sections have a more North American focus and specifically attend to ethnography and education, with contributions from scholars such as Deborah Reed-Danahy, Dorothy Holland, Margaret Eisenhart, Jan Nespore and Sherry Ortner. The contributions are best read as 'tasters' of these scholars' work, as the extracts can do little more than introduce the issues. Hopefully they will encourage you to root out the original monographs.

O'Reilly, K. (2009). *Key Concepts in Ethnography*. London, Sage.

This contribution to Sage's 'Key Concepts' series complements O'Reilly's textbook and offers pithy two–three page discussions of forty or so key terms in the ethnographic lexicon. Each points to a useful set of further readings, and is also fully cross-referenced. With concepts ranging from 'Covert' to 'Coding', from 'Generalisation' to 'Going native', and from 'Rapport' to 'Realism', the book usefully bridges a range of different ethnographic traditions and epistemological positions.

Web resources and journals



Whilst many disciplinary journals publish ethnographic research on education, two scholarly communities, each with their own journals, are dedicated to the sub-field. The journal *Ethnography and Education* was launched by a group of British sociological ethnographers in 2006.

Under the editorship of Bob Jeffrey and Geoff Troman, the journal sought to distil the legacy of three decades of dialogue and publications by ethnographers broadly sympathetic to symbolic interactionism. Since the first conference at St Hilda's in Oxford in 1978 on ethnographic

methodology brought together an invited group of thirty researchers, this scholarly community has developed its own distinctive identity. As the website www.ethnographyandeducation.org makes clear, the community is 'committed to the development of ethnography in education as a vital research methodology that prioritises the perspectives of people's lives'. It has a growing set of resources and an active JISCMail list.

Anthropology and Education Quarterly, edited from the US, is the house journal of the Council of Anthropology and Education (CAE), a section of the American Anthropological Association. CAE's website www.aaanet.org/sections/cae/ has a range of resources, including links to its list-serv, publications and details of conferences and funding, together with an excellent and comprehensive archive of book reviews published in the journal.

Despite their international aspirations, each journal reflects the particular national character of their own field. Many anthropology journals publish ethnographic studies of education, as does the *British Journal of the Sociology of Education* (BJSE). The journal founded by Paul Willis, simply titled *Ethnography*, opens up a stimulating interdisciplinary space for ethnographic work.

There are a growing number of print journals dedicated to the discussion of qualitative methods, including *Qualitative Research*, *Qualitative Inquiry* and *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, which regularly publish ethnographic contributions, often with frank methodological insights and reflections. The 'mainstream' educational journals tend to discourage more experimental ethnographic writing.

Finally, and perhaps most useful for students, are the range of online journals, forums, blogs and resources dedicated to thinking about ethnographic methods and offering up-to-date reflections and discussions. Shielded from the scholarly conventions of print publication, online journals are open and honest about the privations that accompany learning to be an ethnographer. Particularly recommended is the graduate journal www.anthropologymatters.com and the sociology journal www.socresonline.org.uk. The US journal *Cultural Anthropology* has assembled an impressive set of web resources around its print journal.

Beyond the journals, there is a growing range of open resources for educational ethnographers available online. Some of the best blogs and forums include Savage Minds and the Open Anthropology Co-operative. Many individual academics and researchers post initial thoughts and reflections, and even fieldnotes, online, and it is worth looking at some of these to get a sense of the messiness of work in progress. A few minutes' searching will reveal a wealth of individual blogs that relate to your own areas of interest.

Additional online resources can be found at: www.sagepub.co.uk/beraseries.sp