

Narrative as Ethnographic Research Tool

My fieldnotes consisted of a messy conglomerate of information, so I started rewriting them. The process of rewriting turned the fieldnotes into a thick narrative of the situations—with this, step-by-step, the messiness became comprehensible and a coherent picture of the field. Throughout the process of rewriting the position of researcher emerged. The value systems and interpretations of the research comes through the use of language and the way descriptions are used. Narrative thus turned not only into an instrument of creating meaning but also as a tool of reflection.

Ethnographies are tales [...] [they] weave specific analyses of discrete pieces of fieldnote data into an overall story. (Emerson, Robert M., 1995, p.170)

While contemplating the approach for this paper I considered starting with: *once upon a time*; four of the most significant words in my life. Reading or listening to them still triggers images of crackling fires, hot cocoa and the feeling of having school breaks – yeah!

Then I had second thoughts; what do I actually want to say when starting with these four words? *Once*, does this mean one time only? Or does it imply potential for repetition and maybe multiple realities; and off we go talking about quantum physics. The word *upon* absolutely eludes me as a non-native English speaker, is it up or is it on? Well, decide for one or the other, really! Ignoring the *a* I just go straight towards the word *time*, and instantly decide that I don't even want to go there, just last week another of my wristwatches committed suicide.

So what is this all about? It is about potential. The potential these four little words contain; potential of adventures, strange countries, princes, monsters, love and war.

But it is also about the potential for the researcher in the field. A story is not a self-contained entity. It is context-related and stuffed with the ideas of the storyteller, their preoccupations and associations. A story is always set in cultural context and sometimes only makes sense there. Now I shall commit to the storytellers' rules and start this story at the chronological beginning.

(Research Diary, 20th June 2008, Friday)

The paper refers to the case study 'Refugee Children and Social Capital' conducted within the framework of the Applied Educational Research Scheme's (AERS) Schools and Social Capital Network (SCC). The research emanated from a case study undertaken by Dr G. Smyth as the Scottish participant for the CLASP (Creative Learning and Student Perspective) project.

A group of researchers explored how schools and their staff provided opportunities for children, with the emphasis on refugee children, to create and maintain social capital. We looked at the use the children made of social capital and possible impacts this had on the children but also on the schools and communities.

The project was subject to tight time restrictions, nevertheless the fieldwork succeeded with a wide range of data collected. The paper refers to the project fieldwork done in a secondary school in Glasgow. This school has an English as Additional Language (EAL) unit and several years of experience in the education of refugee children.

This ethnographic research project included a variety of methods such as photographs taken by research participants, interviews, observations and fieldnotes.

The paper now shall focus on the fieldnotes taken and their reformulation into a thick narrative of the observations and ad hoc interviews (conversations) with the participants.

Describing life in a narrative form is highly interpretive writing; in doing so, the ethnographer might overdetermine the connections between actions and their movement toward outcome. Making all experiences fit the formal demands of a story falsifies them. (Emerson, Robert M., 1995, p.89)

Considering this critique about the use of narrative for transforming fieldnotes, two questions arise: If writing fieldnotes into a narrative meets these points of caution, who is to say that the initial form of the fieldnotes does not imply similar issues? Does rewriting into narrative not make influences on the data more apparent?

For Bruner (1990) [...] stories involve the violation of normality and an attempt, through human agency, at its restoration. (Squire, C., 2008)

The experiences gained in the field will only make sense in context—and narrative is seen as means of creating this context as will be discussed in the following.

The function of the story is to find an intentional state that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from a canonical cultural pattern. [authors emphasis] It is this achievement that gives a story verisimilitude. (Bruner, 1990, p. 50)

Throughout the fieldwork, the notes taken transformed from bullet points into a coherent narrative. With this transformation the experiences in the field became richer and deeper. Rereading, as well as reformulating, emerged as crucial instruments of making sense of the data collected.

Telling stories helps to put experiences (information) into context and establish coherence, it creates a unit for reflection. (Ekstrom, 2004, p.668)

When narrative started to emerge as an important tool for the researcher to make sense out of the occurrences and experiences in the field, it became necessary to look into the reasons for this.

The quality of any experience has two aspects. There is an immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness, and there is its influence upon later experiences. (Dewey, 1975, p.27)

Stories are not only a means of aiding memory (cf. Schank, 1999) they also create coherence and understanding. Rewriting the fieldnotes into a narrative (story) seemed to make the picture of the events more comprehensible, as if it would be possible to take a three dimensional photograph and add sounds, smells and feelings. It is the creation of a *Sinneinheit* (unit of meaning).

This creation process helped the researcher to gain understanding of what was a personally unfamiliar territory, the Scottish secondary school; as far as there is such a thing as THE Scottish secondary school. It enabled a return to the experiences, created room to build on them as well as a forum for comparison with former fieldnotes. It helped to gain ownership and control of the data gathered and to generate an in-depth picture.

One of the significant gatekeepers at the research site was the receptionist. Initially the researcher was distracted by the way the interaction with her took place. Going back to the data and rewriting the fieldnotes, it became clear that the story of the receptionist was closely linked

to the access issues which preceded the actual fieldwork. The struggle the receptionist had to get the researchers name right and the development of the 'entering the site ritual' showed the change in the position the researcher had in school, as well as the changing perception the researcher had of her position in the school.

After successfully figuring the pull versus push, I once again stood in front of the ever grumpy reddish blonde curly head of a receptionist. Who, once again, decided, although fully aware of me waiting, to ignore me for a couple of minutes before she, with a sour expression, slid the glass window open and asked what I wanted. (Fieldnotes, 29th January 2008, Tuesday)

Once again I met the receptionist, and oh wonder and miracle she smiled at me this time! It was meant to be a friendly smile, but could not cover up her rather sour personality. But hey she tries and leaves me impressed. Well, yeah although repeating my name about 7 times she still calls me Natasha but she smiled we are making progress and she at least tries to remember my name. (Fieldnotes, 5th February 2008, Tuesday)

I forgot to mention that the receptionist was not there today. So I wonder if she just works part time, was in her lunch break or maybe off sick. Who knows another lady came and let me in (Fieldnotes, 21st February 2008, Thursday)

Hey again my receptionist was not there... (dramatic music playing in the background) I cannot understand this, where is she gone? We were only one syllable away from getting my name right (well pronounced, not spelled but you take what you can). A rather pushy lady took over and called Mr J... (Fieldnotes, 26th February 2008, Tuesday)

Oh joy oh pleasure my red curly haired receptionist was there again and hear, hear she turned around, saw me and smiled! She still tried Natasha but was not convinced by this anymore and said it with a question mark at the end.

Well eventually we did even agree that once I signed in and got a visitor's pass from the jannie's office, I don't even have to call on reception anymore and can go straight into the class room. So from now on I move free in school without bodyguards. (Fieldnotes, 29th February 2008, Friday)

A further issue concerning fieldwork, coherence, occurred when trying to grasp more subtle incidences. In situations like this the researcher had attempted extensive notes throughout the field-visit. Due to rewriting and trying to describe the details and placing them into a narrative the researcher tried to find indicators within the situation that could help to understand in depth what was going on. For instance the formulation *a field of bent heads and chewed pencils* is an over-exaggeration of the situation, but it triggers a certain picture that should be familiar to readers with a similar cultural background.

The children are writing on their national exam papers and it is silent time in the classroom, while looking around I can see a lot of things going on although having problems to grasp them. Maybe something the students do, will indicate thinking processes maybe even creativity in producing a story, but at the moment I am looking at a field of bent heads and chewed pencils.

The boy in front of me demonstrates a very sophisticated version of head-resting. He has his right arm on the table resting the right side of the head on the arm while the arm bends over the head and the hand plays with his left ear. He is absolutely focussed on his writing and appears to be not aware of himself; or his body language. This is quite interesting because the children in the class usually demonstrate incredibly strong and conscious body language.

Well the boy also has staring phases, which were rather long but eventually he stopped them at all and just kept writing. He also shifted his position several times nevertheless most of the time playing with his ear. (Fieldnotes, 4th March 2008)

The creation of coherence and *Sinneinheiten* (units of meaning) is only one of the aspects of rewriting fieldnotes into narrative. Another dimension added to this, is that fieldnotes are a means for reflection, they further indicate the researcher's implicit position.

The coherence of a narrative (story) enables us to see a rounded picture of a situation, which offers the researcher space to distance him/herself from the situation without losing the understanding of the depth. Thus it provides space to look back at the data and see what has been written and why. The researcher's position is demonstrated through the usage of descriptors in the fieldnotes. It becomes clear what the researcher understands and interprets as 'typical' British, this again gives a chance to reflect upon where this understanding comes from and if it is justified.

Another point shown in the following extract is how the approach to the field changed with time and better acquaintance with the field and its surroundings. Over time the descriptions of the research site vanished only to come back after the researcher had taken a break from fieldwork and approached the field by a different means of transport.

Professor Alisch from the University of Dresden, said in his Theories and Methodologies Lecture paraphrasing: when you visit a new city have your eyes and your mind wide open, you will never again experience it the way you do when you see it the first time. Similar advice is valid for fieldwork and although trying to step back and look with the eyes of an outsider throughout the research process the field adapts to the researcher as well as the researcher adapts to the field.

Eventually we reached the road to the school passing a row of typical British houses. This is, clones of each other, as if the architects couldn't be bothered with some creativity. The area though, appeared to be well taken care of and some of the houses looked newly built. We passed a sun flooded piece of meadow which hosted gulls, instead of sheep like in the countryside. Maybe Seagulls are the sheep of the cities.

While we were driving through this area I was wondering why it has such a bad reputation, it looked quite homely and clean. I wondered how the children are experiencing their environment at the merge between city and countryside - it appeared rather idyllic. (Fieldwork, 12th November 2007)

This part of the excerpt from the fieldnotes is about the very first visit to the site. And the first sentence already demonstrates a strong point of view of the researcher about things typical for Britain. So from the reflective standpoint an expectation emerges that the researcher might understand things as typically British, whether they are or are not will remain to be explored. The nice weather, scenery and birds triggered a good mood and therefore positive feeling towards the place and the site. These feelings might change the glasses through which the researcher looks during the fieldwork. They might influence the interpretation of situations whether to the positive or to the negative. Going back to the fieldnotes and seeing the scene in context might help to reflect upon these influences.

I proudly present not have gotten lost on the way today chukka!

Approaching Drumchapel is like entering nice suburbs, on the rim of country side, it still startles me that this area has such a bad reputation. It is a grey cloudy November day; although it is warmer outside then it looks. It smells like earth and leaves due to the rain.

Some Christmas mood sneaks in most probably connected with the *Die Toten Hosen* Christmas album I am playing in my car.

Even on such a day this secondary school gives me a positive feeling, it does not appear to be dull or gloomy. Maybe it is because the school is not only looking but also feeling clean. The big entrance hall is bright even on a day like this.

Today when entering the school I observed two windows smashed in (with stones?) and emergency fixed with foil. This is the first sign of not everything here being that bright. (Fieldnotes, 27th November 2007)

Approaching the school was once again a Glaswegian grey, stormy and wet mess ... hurrying from the parking space I seek refuge in the school building. Got my visitor pass and went around the corner to talk to the receptionist.

(Fieldnotes, 26th February 2007)

No one was in the janny's office today. So I took visitor badge number 11 signed and purposefully ignoring the reception desk strode towards the maths room. (Fieldnotes, 2nd May 2008)

No janny was in, but a cleaner or diner lady? Who was eating very bad smelling sandwich (shudder). I am now striding full of confidence through the school pretending I know where I am going to. I got lost on my way back but hey ... this house is like a hamsters' labyrinth. (Fieldnotes, 6th May 2008)

Anyhoo, I was back in Drumchapel the sun shining (again!) on the rolling hills and I was wondering how such a peaceful sight could inherit so much violence somewhere in there. In the houses, in between the houses; sigh. (Fieldnotes, 13th May 2008)

Today the janny is actually in the building and greets me 'Hu back again?' – 'Aye'. I did sign in the janny says see you later. (Fieldnotes, 16th May 2008)

I arrive at 8a.m., freezing the wind funnels through the buildings and I am glad about my winter coat. I meet two teachers when leaving the bus I know them from the English base - they greet me but then ignore me.

A janny I have not yet seen, greets everyone cheerily with wonderful good morning, me too, we complain to each other about the cold weather. He thinks I am a student first, make a note to write a huge thank you card to the hairdresser. I just turned 30 ... the big bad number! Might be the outfit though blue jeans glasses backpack ... what ever keep this hairdresser! (Fieldnotes, 27th May 2008)

Describing situations like the ones above offers a rich base of interpretation, the use of language, reaction of other people in the field towards the researcher, are all influences on how the experiences in the field got shaped; where the influences on understanding and interpretation come from. The next step in the research project will go through all the data and explore patterns and try to understand where the stories came from.

Narrative as an Ethnographic research tool turns potential weaknesses into a strength. The colouring and focus the researcher gives to the narrative can help to understand how sense was made out of data. The stories are able to show where the interpretations of the researcher come from, use of language and even biases for instance show a comprehensive picture to support a thorough analysis. The researcher will never be able to 'just' record realities of the field; even the notes taken right away are pre-interpreted because perception itself is already seen as an interpretation process of the sensory system (cf. Schäfer, 2005?). The use of narrative, its implemented rules and cultural context are therefore a complex interpretation tool.

Sources

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