



Ethnography in Higher Education: An Introduction

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1 Our Starting Point

Ethnographic research in higher education is gaining momentum. In the last 10 years, we saw a great increase in publications, and more and more researchers endorse ethnography because of its distinctive qualities and its productivity for research in higher education: Ethnography is commended for its unique approach to social practices through continuous and immediate experience in field work, and its unfragmented methodical attention to situations, interactions, and experiences. This attention is realised through an field-specific opportunism that is unique to the educational ethnography, a methodology that enables the selection of conclusive data subsequent to an initially unstructured data collection (Hammersley 2017; Walford 2018). These distinctive qualities translate into a set of principles for ethnographic research: Ethnography is a research approach that does take place over time, and engages in an exploration of different situations in the field in order to include a wide range of practices and participant perspectives. This does require time in the field, and continuous reflection on the contexts and processes to which these situations relate. Alongside this, ethnographic research also comes with an interest to illustrate the relationship between situated micro processes of practice, meso processes of a local community, and macro processes

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on socio-historical or political level, which goes beyond the insular microscopic analysis of interaction or the detached macroscopic analysis of discourses and policies.

The unique qualities and principles of ethnographic research are especially fruitful for research on higher education, which can be characterized by its entangled arrangement of different spaces—spaces of learning and teaching, spaces of research, networking spaces, and spaces of higher education policy. What is characteristic for these spaces is their relation to each other, and with respect to research on higher education, their entanglement necessitates an approach that can illustrate the links between them. Educational ethnographers highlight that ethnography is particularly fit to explore and illustrate these links, because it provides a strategy to select appropriate data sets, and to assemble these data sets into compelling collages (Beach 2010). In ethnography, such collages are built on participant observation and field notes, but more often than not, ethnographic accounts include other data, such as video data of interactions, individual and collective self-representations of participants (such as blogs, video diaries, drawings, mappings), different types of interviews, artefacts, or sounds—altogether chosen because they enable “seeing voices” of participants, and because they make us aware of the noises and sounds that shape the ecology of social spaces (Forsey 2010; Maeder 2014).

The development of ethnographic research in higher education is driven by different regional and international networks, which creates a heterogeneous landscape and makes it difficult to identify something like an established field that can be confidently referred to as *the* ethnography of higher education (see also Forsey in this volume). This may be due to the limited meeting spaces for educational ethnography that emphatically focus on higher education. However, the situation still allows to build on previous conferences, symposia, and special issues have started conversations on ethnographic research in higher education, bringing together researchers from different research environments in order to explore ethnographies in higher education in general (e.g. Pabian 2014), or in order to look at more specific topics such as university reforms between global knowledge economy and regional reforms (e.g. Wright and Rabo 2010; Wright et al. 2019). These conversations made clear that ethnographic research is built on diverse premises and traditions, and that most ethnographers rely on a specific set of such premises and traditions, which shapes their culture of doing ethnography. This culture might reflect a certain regional consensus, even though there might be even local cultural differences in the conduct of ethnographic fieldwork and analysis (Beach 2010, p. 50; Breidenstein 2017, p. 11). It might also reflect on the fact that becoming an ethnographer is embedded in local academic cultures,

which shape, enable, and disable research experiences, backgrounds, professional friendships, and contexts of research (Katz 2019).

Altogether, this leads to a situation which requires a certain tolerance towards difference, a belief that each of the ethnographic cultures we meet can be seen as a reflection of a local research regime, and an openness to explore the focal qualities that these cultures may reveal when we listen to them. Furthermore, the situation illustrates that much ethnographic research comes with an implicit commitment to cultural relativism, which is also key to the empirical approach endorsed in ethnography (cf. also Hammersley 2018). After all, ethnography is empirical in the very concrete sense of the word: It is experience-based, and refrains from temptations of standardization and its promise of methodical control, in favour of methodological opportunism and cultural relativism (Knoblauch 2011; Kusch 2019). This relativist approach relates to the famous verdict “anything goes”—which according to Feyerabend (1993, p. 159) means to “make my selection in a highly individual and idiosyncratic way”. Starting with this verdict, our book can be seen as a collection of individual and idiosyncratic ways of doing ethnography in higher education. Together, this collection might not lead to a collective return to “fundamental principles” of ethnographic inquiry (Beach et al. 2018), but it might lead the observant reader to some reflections with respect to the own approach to doing ethnography in the face of the many modalities of ethnography that exist, and to some inspirations with respect to how ethnographic research can be done.

This book includes a collection of chapters that present ethnographic studies on higher education, reflect on teaching ethnography, and discuss innovation in ethnographic methods. Starting point for this collection was the Rethinking Educational Ethnography Conference 2019 in Graz, which brought together a group of ethnographers that engage in higher education. The conference is part of a larger conference series that was started in 2010, grounded in a discussion of emerging concerns in ethnographic research. This discussion started at the first Rethinking Educational Ethnography Conference, dedicated to virtual ethnography. Until today, eight international conferences were organized in Borås, Helsinki, Porto, Barcelona, Napoli, Copenhagen, Klaipeda, Budapest, and Graz. Each year, we use the conference as a meeting space to discuss topics related to ethnographic epistemology, methodology, and practice—the outcome of which can be found in previous publications related to the conference series (Hernández Hernández et al. 2013; Landri et al. 2014). At the same time, the Rethinking Educational Ethnography Conference is relatively small and offers only a limited number of sessions to enable fruitful conversations and discussions amongst participants. The conference culture is to circulate papers before the conference,

and to organise sessions that provide time for a short presentation, where authors can emphasise main points and arguments, while the majority of the time in the sessions is dedicated to a conversation on the paper. Our conference series takes pride in its inclusive approach, and aims to create an atmosphere that welcomes innovation, where experienced and inexperienced researchers have the opportunity to meet, talk and socialize. The eighth conference in Graz has been built on the culture of previous Rethinking Educational Ethnography Conferences, and was organised by Clemens Wieser and Angela Pilch Ortega at University of Graz, in collaboration with the European Educational Research Association EERA Network 19, the Ethnography network.

The thematic focus of the book reflects the conference theme, which highlighted three issues for discussion: Ethnography as a methodology for research on higher education, ethnography as a methodology that engages students in research, and innovation in ethnographic methods. With respect to research on higher education, we argued that ethnography provides an elaborate methodology that emphasises the significance of meanings students, researchers, and university leadership attribute to higher education. Ethnography investigates the everyday life in higher education, from classroom interactions to faculty meetings on university policy, and employs a range of data collection methods to document what is going on in universities. Ethnography thus seems particularly appropriate to address experiences and challenges of students and researchers in higher education. With respect to ethnography as a methodology that engages students in research, we illustrated the benefits of acquiring ethnographic skills: Ethnographic skills enable students to gain inside knowledge into contexts inside and outside of universities (cf. Robinson, in this volume), knowledge that is particularly relevant for professional and community development. Such inside knowledge yields the possibility to connect people, and to reveal and address difference in positions and experiences. These issues reflect in the call for papers. Our call for papers specifically invited contributions that addressed one or several of the following issues:

- Ethnographic studies on higher education contexts: Teaching and learning processes in higher education, curriculum and university development, student engagement and drop-out, inequality in higher education, student cultures and diversity
- Teaching ethnography in higher education: Approaches, benefits and challenges in acquiring a dynamic methodology
- Innovation in ethnographic methods: Auto-ethnography, approaches to virtual ethnography, and approaches to the analysis of diverse ethnographic data

More generally, the Rethinking Educational Ethnography Conference also invited papers that reflect and build on the current discussion of ethnographic epistemology, methodology, and practice. After the conference, the authors who presented a paper had the option to be included in this book, and were invited to develop their conference paper into a book chapter, based on the feedback that they received during the conference. The vast majority of authors opted for this, and the author group that gathered in this book entered a peer review process that took place in two rounds, to make sure that the chapters that you can find in this book are coherent in argumentation, consistent in style, and rigorous in their illustration of academic considerations and empirical findings. The chapters reflect the work of this group of authors, which ranges across the three overarching issues of the conference, and which is united by the careful attention to the everyday life in higher education, the unexpected exception of the rule, and the implicit meanings of practice. In line with the issues of the conference, the book is made up of three parts: Part I focuses on Ethnographic Studies in Higher Education, part II focuses on Teaching Ethnography, and part III focuses on Innovation in ethnographic methods. Each part is led by a contribution from one of the keynote speakers of the conference: Martin Forsey, Sarah Robinson, and Christoph Maeder. The following sections give a quick overview over the chapters.

2 Part I. Ethnographic Studies in Higher Education

In the first chapter *Questions of Imagination: On the Dearth of Ethnography in Higher Education*, Martin Forsey reflects on the absence of ethnography research in higher education. Starting with the question “What is going on here?”, the chapter brings together a range of ethnographic perspectives to argue that the way in which ethnography is imagined and practiced significantly contributes to our beliefs about the prevalence of ethnography in higher education. Through various imaginaries of ethnographic practice, the chapter explores opportunities and barriers in which ethnography can be practiced in the field of higher education. The chapter concludes with the argument that ethnographic studies in higher education need to build more legitimacy than they currently enjoy, both inside and outside of higher education.

Clemens Wieser focuses on *Teaching Expertise in Higher Education*, and explores how an experienced university teacher maintained constructive alignment in practice. The chapter builds on the theoretical consideration that both personal and practical knowledge are essential for teaching. Taking a look at teaching expertise in higher education, the chapter presents a knowledge devel-

opment model that frames teaching as a practical set of orientations that guide awareness and enable situated appraisal, and a personal set of orientations that enables the problematisation of teaching experiences. This model provides the background for an ethnographic case study at the University of Copenhagen, which explores the professional development of an experienced teacher at the Faculty of Science. The case study illustrates that the teachers' work particularly focuses on maintaining constructive alignment for students.

Miriam Madsen illustrates a *Post-Humanist Critical University Ethnography*. The chapter highlights the potential of a critical-creative reconfiguration of critique, and aims to stimulate a rethinking of ethnographic research practice that challenges existing power relations and creates a space for gathering main university actors, such as students, academics and managers. The chapter provides an outline of post-humanist philosophy, and illustrates ways in which this theoretical position links to ethnographic research. In a next step, the chapter proposes an innovative arrangement of ethnographic research practice that explores ways in which philosophical ideas can be operationalised into methodological decisions. Consequently, the chapter presents parts of an empirical analysis that exemplifies how a critical-creative ethnography can avoid the reproduction of power relations.

The chapter "*Process not product*": *Rethinking Feminist Teaching across Disciplines with Autoethnographic Trialogues* by Daniela Jauk, Sabine Klinger and Nicole Pruckermayer aims to address feminist teaching through autoethnographic trialogues. In their writing, autoethnography is used as a method for self-interrogation in three voices. As an author team with different approaches to gender studies and feminism, they explore their feminist practice of teaching, and bring together their personal pathways and the question of how it shapes teaching practice. The reflection and re-construction of heteronormative and patriarchal-bias in knowledge production processes and the implementation of intersectional strategies is part of their feminist teaching practice. Questioning the universality of feminist ideas of teaching and underlining the procedural character of their exploration, they offer critical reflections and inspire critical thinking and practice within feminist teaching spaces.

3 Part II. Teaching Ethnography

Sarah Robinson's chapter *Ethnography for Engaging Students with Higher Education and Societal Issues* presents ways in which we can shift away from a neoliberal focus in education. While educational institutions are under critique because they do not prepare students to respond to challenges of a future that is

changing and unpredictable, entrepreneurial mindsets and neoliberal discourses have deeply influenced university structures. The chapter emphasises that ethnography provides the means to engage students with knowledge that links to real life issues, and empowers active citizenship. More specifically, this engagement relies on the Scandinavian definition of entrepreneurship, and a change maker model that is used for teaching at Aarhus University in Denmark. Ethnography here becomes a pedagogical tool that involves students in the process of knowledge production and the exploration of societal issues.

The chapter *Teaching Ethnographical Methods: Research Workshops for Students as a Space for Critical Reflection on Knowledge Production* by Angela Pilch Ortega also focuses on ethnography as a pedagogical tool that offers opportunities for critical reflection on knowledge production processes. She argues that knowledge production and the formation of opinions is shaped by patterns of interpretation that remain widely tacit. The author argues that research workshops provide a space for critical reflection on such tacit knowledge, and that these research workshops encourage students to question their personal assumptions. Based on the analysis of a research workshop on qualitative research methods for students, the chapter gives insights into some of the challenges that teachers may face when doing research on ethnically sensitive topics.

With their chapter *We Are, I Am, You Are: "Joining in" as a Pedagogy and Research Tool*, Corinne McKamey, Cleti Cervoni, and Rhoda Bernard reflect on their approach of "joining in" both with respect to its pedagogical function as well as its function for research. Joining in as an educational tool has been developed as a common practice of their teaching and research activity. The authors argue that the logic of joining in is more than a tool—it is an approach to teaching and research that questions the idea of a single powerful professor in the room. In their chapter, they give three examples which illustrate how joining in can be used in a range of contexts in order to collect, analyse, and reflect on empirical data.

4 Part III. Innovation in Ethnographic Methods

In the chapter *The Problem of the Definition of the Situation in Educational Ethnography*, Christoph Maeder takes an interactionist perspective to elaborate on the concept of situation in educational ethnography. Based on the fact that we all have a familiarity with the educational system and its routinized and embodied membership knowledge, the chapter unfolds the argument that it is necessary to look at pedagogical situations as professional strangers in order to construct how people in a classroom act as educators and students. This interest in the construc-

tion of a pedagogical situation leads towards an illustration of molecules of pedagogical situations, which starts out with Goffman's question "What is going on here?", and presents ethnomethodological concepts for the analysis of pedagogical interaction. Ultimately, this illustration underlines one central asset of ethnographic research on education, namely that it can provide precise descriptions and systematic analysis based on participant observation.

In the chapter *Going Dark*, Ned Barker offers some reflections on doing ethnography in higher education. In his chapter, he problematizes the privileged use of observation in ethnographic traditions and the tendency to fade in terms of visibility and immediacy within the research process. The chapter provides an argument that permanent reflection is a core practice of ethnographic research. Without this permanent reflection, we are left in the dark and unable to find a way to respond to the nittygritty qualitative nature of ethnography. Drawing on two methodological vignettes, he gives insights into the reflection process of his PhD research, with the intention to uncover methodological tensions and to offer possibilities of being lured into darkness whilst doing participant observation.

Finally, the chapter *Virtual Networks and Asynchronous Communities: Methodological Reflections on the Digital* by Darlinda Moreira offers a reflection on methodological aspects of ethnographic research in a digital educational field. The chapter raises methodological issues and challenges when doing research on cyberspaces, virtual networks and the asynchronous communities. Moreover, it underlines the specific modes of communication and interaction of cyberspaces that need to be considered when doing research in this area. Her reflections focus on specific challenges of doing participant observation in a cyberspace context.

5 Discussion

The conversation on Ethnography in Higher Education that this book provides is situated within the broader economic, societal and regional contexts of universities, and provides an understanding of whether and how ethnography is responsive to the methodological challenges of exploring higher education, how we can teach ethnography in higher education, and how we can arrive at innovation in ethnographic methods. Each of the chapters in the book reflects on empirical data, providing critical insight into the possibilities that educational ethnography offers in higher education, as well as exploring issues and challenges surrounding the methodology. Reading the chapters in relation to each other, the individual contributions also go beyond the three main issues of the book, addressing a range of further issues: Some authors focus on the ways in which educational ethnog-

raphy draws on theory, how current theoretical developments impact the empirical enterprise of ethnography, and support venturing into unfathomed phenomena (Maeder, Wieser, Madsen, and Moreira, in this volume). Another group of authors emphasises the political role that educational ethnographers take, and address the political implications of doing ethnography, using it as an empowerment strategy to resist the neoliberal university, subvert academic power relations, and reject heteronormative and patriarchal subjection (Robinson, as well as Pilch Ortega, McKamey/Cervoni/Bernand, and Jauk/Klinger/Pruckermayer, in this volume). Yet another group of authors takes a reflective stance towards educational ethnography, exploring the reliance of ethnographic research on permanent reflection, and how the situation of educational ethnography is co-constructed by our own definition of its situation in the wider field of education (Barker and Forsey, in this volume).

The ideas and considerations gathered in this book form the beginning of a conversation. Looking across the different chapters and into the topics that are jointly raised, this conversation might lead to answers to some the challenges we experience, and to the perspectives we imagine. We hope you, the readers, will join and expand this conversation with your commentary, critique, and debate. We hope you enjoy the book!

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