

Case Studies in Research Methods Pedagogy

Teaching ethnographic methods through facilitated discussion



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This case study draws upon 12 hours of classroom observation, two teacher interviews and observation of one teaching planning session prior to teaching. A video-stimulated focus group engaged teachers and learners together immediately after the second session. Data was also informed by two short student interviews and informal research conversations with students across the sessions. Lastly, exit interviews with the teaching team reflected on the course. Researchers had access to all teaching and evaluation materials, and, with participant consent, learners' written contributions to sessions. This is done to draw out the teacher's craft knowledge – the strategies and tactics that make the teaching come alive, as well as understanding learners' perspectives. In this instance, the teaching team and teaching assistant, who we shall call Vincent, Alisa, and Reenie respectively, have adopted the pedagogic approach of facilitated discussion, rooted deeply in traditions of dialogic pedagogy^{1,2} and akin or familiar to 'the Crit' in fine art training. The course has been developed and honed by Vincent over several years.

Today, small groups of learners cluster around desks, cabaret-style. They have met in the previous week, been introduced to each other and a purposeful reading list. Together the class occupy a bright room within a pleasant, purpose-built environment where the class can spill out into the lawned garden or nearby park. The group are learning an arts-based ethnographic technique, working with expert teachers from the disciplines of education and anthropology who are team-teaching over a series of hazy summer afternoons. The course is optional, with no assessment. Many learners visit from doctoral research programmes in different disciplines. Learners know they are privileged to have this opportunity to practice and share with peers, and many are already prepping for fieldwork or deploying related ethnographic techniques.

The teachers, Vincent and Alisa, have not worked together before. Vincent conceived the course and has adapted it over several years. Alisa is new to this course, bringing a new energy and emphasis on sensory ethnographic methods. She talks of how the teaching styles of her and Vincent complement each other; she favours more structure, he less. The teaching assistant, Reenie, was on the course last year. Vincent welcomes the 'in-between-ness' of her learner-teacher perspective. Reenie says she wanted to be involved in the course again as it represented 'a space for me to actually ask myself questions that I wasn't being allowed to ask in other spaces' - where methods are 'simply about the mechanics of it' - which, she reflects, 'feels empty to me'.

The students have had the task of doing some experimental writing and putting it into an online repository to share ahead of teaching. Today they are sharing their thoughts on the messily intertwined research and writing process and on the outcomes.

Pedagogic approach

Facilitated discussion is both student-centred and an active learning approach. Throughout, learners are engaged in one core task: to use and discuss a specific ethnographic technique that teaches them much about ethnographic method more widely. Facilitated discussion is realised through core strategies of dialogue, trust and modelling. Multiple tactics are used in class to realise these strategies, and one fundamental task is experimental writing. All tasks are shaped by a research method that is both the pedagogic content and the context.

Students talk together in pairs or groups in animated discussions for around thirty minutes uninterrupted by Vincent and Alisa who sit at the teacher's table, front and middle, discussing, jotting on post-its, and intermittently scanning the room and tuning into conversations. As researchers, we sit at the back to one side doing similar. We have one tiny window mounted video camera facing the teachers and another on the students, but we are noting how the students are engaged in the task, some animated, some still; Reenie is in one of the groups, as if a student today.

It is striking by how trusting this teaching is. The groups are trusted to discuss in productive ways, and they do so. Any teacher monitoring is almost imperceptible. The discussants are left to find their own path through the critical issues at their own pace; they are trusted to involve each other and to learn from the process. The teachers seem to have no difficulty in holding back, whereas we reflect that we would want to move around the groups, dip into the conversations, share some of our wisdom!

As the group come together as a whole, Vincent asks very open questions, inviting sharing and listening attentively. His responses are invariably low-key probes for clarification, prompts to say more or if questioned, opening the question to the group; he is not making himself part of the conversation at this stage, though in later weeks he becomes more dialogic. The only indication he gives of whether the learners are on track is to nod and comment 'interesting'. He later explains that he sees his approach as facilitating discussion. Vincent rarely injects ideas or give feedback; the learners know the onus is on them to work out this ethnographic technique.

In another round of small group discussions Alisa had shared some thoughts about the sensory dimensions in ethnography, she has put a sheet of paper on each table so that it might prompt the learners to enrich their discussion with these ideas. This injection of structured input is very subtle and clearly optional. The learners mostly leave the sheets on the table as the discussions resume. The learners have turned their ethnographic lenses on themselves for the piece of experimental writing, and they are respectful about how personal and sensitive this is. Vincent has explained to us that 'not everyone wants to circulate' their writing 'but they have to ... Because there is a moment of trusting'. They do give feedback to each other; we hear, "I really like the opening". There is a lot of hand movement during their talking, leaning forward to listen, and non-verbal invitations to take a turn. This is in contrast with the teachers who hold back including limited use of their bodies; their performativity is extremely constrained.

Pedagogic strategies

Vincent's approach to facilitated discussion is purposefully unstructured and non-directive, fostering student-led dialogue, a democratic classroom^{2,3} that cultivates a creative flow of ideas and conversation.

Pedagogic resources

In this teaching the fundamental pedagogic resource is the learners themselves. To fully realise this, strategies for trust and engagement are key.

More familiar supporting pedagogic resources are the reading material (which has been very thoughtfully selected by the teaching team) and the data/writing produced, which is shared online ahead of, and during class.

Vincent has no slides and does not present at any point; this is indicative of his facilitative and conversational—rather than didactic—style. While Alisa makes some exposition upon request, neither have anything supporting them onscreen. Students work at a personal scale in conversations over laptops.

Discussing the pedagogy we have experienced

Following the session, three learners (Cassandra, Carl and Silos), the teachers Vincent, Alisa and Reenie, Sarah (researcher) and sit down with us to discuss the pedagogy we have just experienced, aided by video excerpts. We probe what was going on that was not visible to us all, asking about the teachers' apparent trust in the learners, right down to not giving a sense of rightness or wrongness in the learners' activity. The learners clarify that this is familiar in the pedagogic culture of the place. Cassandra, Carl and Silos take the conversation into what was going on in the group discussions, who was talking or not talking and what this meant about their engagement and inclusion. Cassandra is concerned that their small group did not get onto the work of one of its members, and Reenie reflects on the tension between giving attention ('care') to each person's work and seeing the diversity amongst them. It is evident that the learners assume their responsibilities as teachers during the session and the reflective conversation about it.

We talk about the freedom the learners had with the lack of imposed structure on their discussions. Carl appreciates the way it meant that 'we got to go in different directions' and that they had to 'self-regulate'; Cassandra observes that despite a 'slow start', 'once we were in it, it was very animated and it took off'. For Reenie 'the lack of direction actually opened up the possibility for us to really enter the [technique] ... we were able to develop our own cadences and approach', but she wonders 'if having more direction would have helped ... just kind of equalised the push to move on' around everyone. Vincent reflects that his unstructured approach comes from his experience of American graduate seminars in which, 'we'd just gather around a table and discuss people's work'. He clarifies his caution about not wanting to make the task more prescriptive and therefore less holistic and Cassandra agrees, 'because there were so many things that came out in the discussion that I would never have thought about' and in that the desired topics 'all came up in the discussion anyway'. Carl feels okay with this as he is safe in the knowledge that 'the people I'm with are going to say intelligent things and that we're going to learn from each other'. Reenie later describes how:

'there's a level of comfort that students at this level have with just engaging a text, that's what we're trying to do, but this is altogether a different question about how to engage your experience with text, and to watch that in real time ... it's very hard work. [...] the class really depends on people being super-thoughtful about their experience'.

There is a coherence to the whole pedagogy and a culture that supports its success. As the course progresses, week on week, a rhythm is established. At the beginning of the final session Alisa states 'we'll do what we did last week', all the students understand what this means and each leads in talking and critically discussing their ethnography for 20 minutes.

Pedagogic tactics

Teachers model and trust the learners to work in a holistic unstructured way. The pedagogic hook here is reflection on the ethnographic technique and what it generates; the tactics are for the teachers to hold back and not direct – as Vincent says 'facilitating conversation' occasionally asking, as Reenie put it, 'good and provocative questions. Vincent could identify with the in-class, quick thought nature of *tactics*, which he connected to notions of 'busking' or 'relying in embodied expertise ... to know how to judge a class', but his tactic was to keep out of the learners' conversation.

Pedagogic values

This teaching destabilises notions of expertise in the room. Everyone – teachers and learners – seems to take on the status of combined expert and learner. The 'teacher' is the process of ethnographic engagement and writing rather than any one individual. In sharing their work, the learners are in a rather distinctive way working with their own data and meeting across disciplines. A pedagogy that at first seemed invisible to the learners emerges as one that they understand and of which they can make good use.

References

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