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The practice of writing ethnographic fieldnotes

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Fieldnotes are central to ethnographic practice, yet there is surprisingly little written about how fieldnotes are constructed. This article reports the results of some interviews with four well-known ethnographers of education who were questioned about their practice. It is designed to be a resource for those new (and, maybe not so new) to ethnography.

Keywords: fieldnotes; writing; ethnography

Introduction

Fieldnotes are the basis on which ethnographies are constructed. They are the record from which every article and book about the ethnographic research draws, and against which every ethnographer tests developing ideas and theories.

One thing that is common to all ethnography (or, at least, every good ethnography) is that copious fieldnotes are made by the researcher throughout the whole time in the field. There are several key books and articles that discuss the nature of what might be recorded (e.g., Bogdan and Biklen 2007, 118–29; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995, 2001; Jackson 1990; Sanjek 1990) and there are some reflexive accounts of how particular researchers have used their notes in the writing of articles and books (e.g., Jeffrey 1999; Melhuus 2002; Beach 2005). But fieldnotes are usually viewed as being very personal and idiosyncratic in nature and our knowledge of the detail of what is recorded and how the record is used is limited.

This paper is part of a study of how ethnography is actually conducted. It involves interviewing a small number of key ethnographers about the practices they engaged in while researching and writing one of their recent and significant ethnographies within the field of education broadly defined. They, and their ethnographies, will be named in the papers (Walford 2005). Related papers on interviewing and embodied ethnographic practice (Walford 2007a, 2007b) have already been published.

The research, although small scale, can be viewed as worthwhile simply because of the significance of the ethnographers selected. To understand more about how these people make and use fieldnotes can be expected to enhance future ethnographic studies.

The ethnographers

This paper is based on just four interviews. These people were chosen because I value their work highly and because they represent some degree of spread of

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styles and interests. They are: Paul Connolly, Sara Delamont, Bob Jeffrey and Lois Weis.

Paul Connolly's ethnographic work was mainly worked with early year children where he focussed on issues of race and gender (Connolly 1998, 2004). His books have been particularly important for the way they have highlighted these issues for children of an age where it is often thought they have little relevance. He is a Professor at Queen's University Belfast.

Sara Delamont has conducted many ethnographic classrooms and school studies (e.g., Delamont 1983, 1984) and has written about fieldwork methods (Delamont 2002). In my interview with her, I focussed on her research about teaching in a *Capoeira* 'classroom' – a form of dance and martial art originating in Brazil which is played, danced and fought to the music of the stringed *berimbau* (Delamont 2005, 2006, 2008; Stephens and Delamont 2006a, 2006b). She has been at Cardiff University for over 30 years where she has been Dean of Faculty and is a reader.

Bob Jeffrey has been working at the Open University since 1992 on various projects concerned with creative teaching and learning in primary schools, and the lives of primary school teachers (e.g., Jeffrey and Woods 1998; Wood and Jeffrey 1996; Woods and Jeffrey 2003; Woods et al. 1997). In my interview with him, I focussed mainly on his work with the effects of inspection on primary schools.

Lois Weis has conducted a series of ethnographic studies on black and disadvantaged youth in the USA (Weis 1985, 1990). Her major publication (Weis 2004) is an interview-based follow-up of the young people involved in her 1990 ethnographic study of the white working class. She has also written extensively on research methodology (e.g., Weis and Fine 2004). She is professor of Sociology of Education at the University of Buffalo, State University of New York.

Understanding ethnography through interviews?

There is something rather strange about using interviews to understand the writing of ethnographic fieldnotes. After all, one of the central beliefs of ethnography is that multiple methods should be used in any investigation and, in particular, that interviews are unlikely to be productive by themselves. I have written at length about interviews elsewhere (Walford 2001, chap. 6). They are unusual affairs in that the socially accepted rules of conversation and reciprocity between people are suspended. One person takes the lead and asks a series of questions of the other. The other has agreed that this is to be a special form of conversation and is prepared for his or her views to be continuously questioned without the usual ability to be able to return the question. The topics to be covered are under the control of the 'interviewer' and the 'interviewee' is expected to have opinions or information on each of the questions asked. Moreover, what the interviewee says is taken to have lasting importance – it is recorded for future analysis. This is not a transitory conversation, but one that is invested with significance.

We know that interviewers and interviewees co-construct the interview and the replies to questions are produced for that particular occasion and circumstance. Interviewees will select their words with care (as in other formal occasions) and will moderate what they have to say to the particular circumstances. If we put to one side the epistemological question of whether or not there is any ultimate 'reality' to be communicated, the interviewee may have incomplete knowledge and faulty

memory. They will always have subjective perception which will be related to their own past experiences and current conditions. At best, interviewees will only give what they are prepared to reveal about their subjective perceptions of events and opinions. These perceptions and opinions will change over time, and according to circumstance. They may be at some considerable distance from any 'reality' as others might see it.

Douglas (1976) describes four problems – misinformation, evasion, lies and fronts – and indicates ways of trying to avoid their effects. He follows this with a detailed exposition of the problems of taken-for-granted meanings, problematic meanings and self-deception. With this study of ethnographers, I would certainly not expect any outright deception, although there may be some evasion in discussing particular aspects of the research process. But outright deception is only part of the problem, for we know that accounts of what we do are created rather than revealed through narrative (Convery 1999). Our actions are not inherently coherent. Our lives are result of chance and circumstance as much as our own activities and plans. The unexpected happens; the expected does not. In this uncertainty, we all try to make sense of our own worlds and actions, and the interview is one occasion when we try to do so in a semi-public forum. We try to present a reasonably rational image of our own uncertainty.

How, then, is it possible to justify using interviews to investigate how these ethnographers conduct ethnography and write fieldnotes? Surely the only reasonable method is to observe, interview and collect our own artefacts alongside the 'subject' ethnographer as he or she goes about the task? Perhaps this would be ideal but also, perhaps, an over-investment of time and energy. However, while I have certainly not observed the processes by which these four people go about doing ethnography, the fact that I have read the published ethnographies and read some of their other more methodological work, means that I am not simply relying on interviews and that there is a strong element of mixed methods in the work. I am not simply using the results of interviews where I have no other sources of data – there is a wealth of textual data that provides a different form of evidence about the nature of fieldnotes used.

It is worth noting that, in my experience with these four ethnographers, ethnographers make good interviewees. I found all four to be highly reflexive about their research methods and always prepared to answer at length. At times they would re-phrase my question for me so that it made more sense and would offer more information that I had not explicitly asked for to clarify what they wished to say.

In the presentation of all of the extracts from interviews below, my concern has been with clarity of communication. I have edited for meaning. In particular, I have edited out some hesitations and combined several responses – often without giving an indication that this has been done. These transcripts have been seen by the interviewees and, at times, they have made slight changes to what they originally said.

What are fieldnotes?

One of the clear things to come from just these four interviews is that there are similarities as well as differences in the ways that these ethnographers actually

construct fieldnotes and in the terminology that they use to describe what they do. There is no consistent terminology used by the four to describe the stages that they go through to construct a written record of what they have seen or wish to record while in the field, but all four go into the field armed with some sort of notebook or pad to write in.

Lois Weis used straightforward US-style yellow pads (a little smaller than A4) and might write about six pages double-spaced for each lesson observed. Bob Jeffrey used small A5 notepads and produced 'perhaps a couple of dozen' pages in an hour.

In her work on *Capoeira* teaching, Sara Delamont used a variety of notebooks to make an initial record and then to expand them with more detail. Here the location of the teaching is usually a small, cramped hall, where the physical activity fills the space. The observer has to be prepared to move quickly out of the way to a new position and most of the time is spent standing. On site, she uses reporter's notebooks:

- S Well I work with little spiral bound reporter's notebooks and the stack of them is actually behind you [in the office]. Those ones with shiny covers [G: ah yeah ok].
- S Yes, I work with those and one of the things I'm obsessive about is that all stationery should match when I have a new project. I have to have stationery and, so those are. They're all shiny and they're blue or silver, because when I first started doing the work I happened to have in my office, four, two blue and two silver, reporter's notebooks and I started using those, so now I have been hunting, I've found those which sort of are the same.
- S I started notebook 20 on Wednesday night [G: right] so there are some more that are still on their way in. I keep that version in here.

Whilst in the actual school, Paul Connolly used a small notebook about 5x3 inches in size:

- P It depended where I was. If I start with the playground I was, the picture of me, the image of me would be just standing in the middle of the playground [G: right] with a notebook in my hand.
- G With your little black book in your hand? [P: yeah] ok.
- P I mean, often actually in my pocket most of the time but it kept coming out. I'd write something down, put it away again and just walking around the playground basically sort of tracking children and following them around. I mean it was pretty hectic and chaotic.

But what these initial jottings are called varies.

For Paul Connolly:

- G So those notes you are making what do you call those notes? Are they fieldnotes or what are they?
- P My main fieldnotes would be what I wrote up afterwards [G: ok]. So what I wrote in these little pocket books were just shorthand notes of quick incidents written down, broadly, a couple of sentences really. So for a quarter of an hour stretch there may be about three or four pages – just of two sentences – somebody playing with somebody, somebody chasing someone else and so on. I would then use these to write up more detailed notes in the evening. Given the amount of things going on during a typical school day it's amazing how much you'd forget if you didn't keep a running record like this to remind you.

Sara Delamont, however, uses the terminology of ‘field notebooks’ for the notebooks in which she writes her fieldnotes in the field, and she then expands these notes into ‘out-of-the-field-notes’.

For Lois Weis, what is done in the field is fieldnotes, but for classroom work she does not expand them at all:

- G Right ok. So you have these notes, what do you do with them? Do you write them up again? Do you expand them? Or what? I'm still thinking about classrooms at the moment.
- L Right. I don't expand them. The classroom data for me are always inside the bigger ethnography so I will have interviews with teachers, I will have interviews with students, I will have interviews with parents, I try to get at administrative structures, I have a whole booklist of interviews so that classroom observation is just one piece of it.

What is actually written?

Sara Delamont showed me some of her field notebooks during the interview:

- G And what you're basically doing is you're only writing on one side of the paper [S: yes] you're dating, you're timing, you're putting a few words down [S: yes] not very many words [S: no] but a few words down.
- S Yes now I count and I keep a record of how many sessions I've observed so I know I've watched 124 classes of which 92 are by Achilles or something of that, I mean I keep that as a running record [G: right] I've watched Perseus I think 14 times and you know. I've always done reporter's notebooks since the St Luke's study – I've always worked with those. I don't hide them or anything, I don't make any attempt to hide them, I make it very clear I'm writing because that's one of the ways that students come to me and say ‘what are you doing?’
- G Well these are quite big so you can't really hide it.
- S And I deliberately don't. I mean as we go in, I open the notebook and date it and I'm standing there and I have a pen, you know, and I'm actually writing and I write very obviously because that's a good reason for them to come and say ‘what are you writing?’ or ‘what are you doing?’
- S So I might sit, I might stand, I might squat I might lean, but there isn't usually anything to press on or anything else so I'm normally writing with the notebook just sort of in my hand [G: right] and I write just key words as you saw. I time, partly as a sort of structuring thing so I know, you know, I could, I haven't ever bothered to go back and do detailed counting, but if anybody were ever interested I could say what proportion of the class have arrived by five to eight, of the event, how many were there at ten to eight, how many were there at five to, how many were there at eight o'clock, how many were there at five past when Achilles himself arrived [G: ok], that kind of thing, so I log how many students are present against a time, and also how much segments of the lesson are about things.
- G And why is that important, why have chosen that as something you write about?
- S I don't know to be honest. I think I partly do it to give myself some sort of forced external structure [G: right] because I don't think time, except in the big sense that in a lot of cases the room's only been hired for an hour and a half or two hours. And I think I do it partly to structure it for me and I think that's because I did a lot a school ethnography where it's lessons [G: ok] and you might want to work out how much of a lesson is spent in group work and how much in individual desk work or something I think [G: ok] counting the numbers I think is just pure interest really because I think it's another way of finding out. No, I think I just do it because it's useful thing to do. Um, I then I do draw all the rooms so if I suddenly came to a new place I would draw whatever room it is he teaches in. And I do that and I draw those and I draw any new location, and I always mark on my maps where I am which I

what I always used to do in classrooms I just drew every classroom and I always marked where I was [G: ok] and I would do that, and in my notes I will record when I move.

Sara later gave more detail on her method of working:

- G Ok. I want to go back actually [S: yes ok] because I still want to know how you choose to, what you're going to record in your field notebooks.
- S Ok right.
- G I mean there's a heck of a lot going on out there.
- S Ferocious amount. Ok. Well I do I think that's one of the reasons why I do some of these basic times and counts because, I do that every time [G: right] so there's some continuity. Um, what else do I, what do I do? Well I try, but I don't succeed necessarily, not always to focus on the same things. Um I think, the first thing I concentrate on very little of the instruction is actually verbal [G: right] a lot of the teachers have pretty ropey English and anyway it's very noisy and this is mostly instruction by 'watch this' and then doing something, so every single word, I try to record every single word the teacher says verbatim [G: ok] everything that's said publicly to the whole class [G: ok] so if the teacher says to the whole class 'hey guys watch where you put your hand, put your palm flat'. I will write that in the book and that will have priority over anything else. But if the teacher is with just you and is saying 'hey Geoff your hand isn't down'. I wouldn't write that down I'd merely say that the teacher was with Geoff. Because that's a, sort of, to me that's a slightly sort of, private interaction, so I write the public discourse but there isn't a lot of that. I keep a very careful note of what moves, capoeira moves they teach. I write down what they're teaching, and a lot of it is teaching sequences of moves, so a lot of it is teaching people not just to do one kick but how to go from a particular kick into a defense because the other guy's going to have kicked you back.

As shown in Appendix 1 (which was supplied after the interview) Sara Delamont actually has a range of different notebooks and files that are used to generate and store data.

Bob Jeffrey explained what he was looking for when observing and what he would note down:

- B I'm looking for creative teaching or I'm looking for the way teachers are teaching. And I generally, I write down the facts – the first characteristic of qualitative fieldwork observation according to Lofland – and then intersperse these with comments and questions in brackets.
- G What do 'the facts' mean? What do you mean by writing? Let's think about in a staffroom, because quite a lot of your inspection research [*Testing teachers*] is in a staffroom isn't it? You're sitting there with your notepad, [B: right], what are you doing, you're writing down?
- B Right, for example: Angelina goes to get some coffee. She sits down on her own. [G: right] Two people are in the corner laughing about an incident yesterday in the playground. Or it might be about something from home. They don't seem bothered about inspection, [G: Yes, yes ok] they're talking about something else. Marilyn is sitting quietly on her own in a corner looking a little miserable because of what happened yesterday. Dave goes across and makes a joke and has a talk to her. I do a lot of evocation writing as well, field notes, focusing on the atmospheres, pauses, silences, laughter – even sometimes the weather, if that's making an impact on the classroom itself. I try to create a picture if I'm sitting there doing that kind of observation in a staff room. And it would be the same in a classroom if I were watching a group of children or the interactions between the teacher and the children, what the children are doing, what particular interactions

are going on, and how far they are engaged and how far they reconstruct the interactions as they are going along. How they reconstruct them and play with them or how they ignore other interactions, so it is a general picture building most of the time.

- G Ok, now when you are trying to write a description, are you in fact writing a description that could be then transformed into the book, translated directly into the book, or are you making a note that you then expand?
- B I just keep writing, they're mainly note form and then a little while later, I might sit down at a computer and write a memo which might be one page, might be four or five pages, it may be in connection with my particular sociologic imagination, it may be related to some sociological theories, it may be trying out a metaphor or it may be connected to a personal experience, be a visit that I made that connects with the work I was thinking about and the situation I observed. I might recreate a vignette as well. And am I writing then for publication in the book? Not necessarily.
- G But you've got a vignette at that point? Something that is further on from just writing fieldnotes?
- B I have two things, there are vignettes and there are analytical memos.

The actual amount of writing carried out in the field depends on the actual setting and the individual people involved. In a *Capoeira* class, where the researcher is standing and has to move around a lot, it is impossible for anyone to write more than brief notes which need to be expanded later, but classrooms provide a chance for extensive notes to be written at the time. So much so that Lois Weis did not expand hers at all. As she said:

- L Actually, doing observation in a school is the easiest because, whether kids are engaged in taking notes or not, they should be. So when we're in there as observers it's easy for us to kind of blend into the background because I just become another person in a classroom taking notes. That I find the easiest form of ethnographic observation.

While for other situations she does make brief notes and expand later:

- G The main thing is remembering the stuff.
- L I do that from observed actions in sites, and what I do is I remember key words and I'm pretty good at, I concentrate really, really hard, I remember the key words, I will immediately write down those key words, and then I will, as soon as I can, I will write them up, and as far as possible I try to do it verbatim, I'm fairly good at that.

Paul Connolly was less happy to write extensively during lessons and made no direct notes in staffrooms:

- P Just trying to track and, looking back a lot of that was written was just not of any use at all, but again you're sort of honing in, at the start you write down just everything you're seeing and there's very little pattern or rationale to what you're doing [G: yeah]. By, towards the end, you know your ideas are developing in terms of processes that you're drawing out and identifying and you're much more then focussed in what you're looking for, but certainly in the early stages. And then there will be critical incidents, and there's some in my book, either in the classroom or the playground. And you know at that time when it's happening that this is important and that's why you try and write down as much as you can word for word what's being said. And in the playground that's simple enough because you just stand there and you get the book out and start writing and sort of walking, following the children round if they're walking round, and you're trying to write down what

they're saying, And it's never perfect but then the important thing is, that afternoon or that evening, that you write it up. It's where you would add in more detailed observations and descriptions of the expressions of the children or their postures and so on. And I think I've lost a fair bit of notes just by not writing it up and those that notebook sort of shorthand things make no sense at all even after about a week [G: no] if you're doing it day by day.

- G I'm sure that's right.
- P So the classroom was a bit different or the staffroom it wasn't as easy to pull out a notebook at the start because especially at the start it wasn't because the teacher would be there saying something, she'd see in the corner of her eye that you'd pulled out your notebook and she'd take that personally [G: right] like you're making notes on me [G: oh ok] so the more that we went through, well the strategy I had there was to try and just show her the notebook and mostly it was just about has little maps of where children sat on the carpet to see if anything emerged out of that [G: right] and I'd show her things like that and just say look this is the sort of thing I'm doing I don't know if this makes any sense or not but, and that would reassure them a little bit, and also if I ever got my notebook out I would make sure I was looking at the children when I got the notebook out.
- P I mean [...] over time you just do a lot of toilet breaks and you go to the toilet and sit down especially with one of those critical incidents that I mentioned and you think you know that's so important I need to write that up again then I would just nip to the toilet and just sit down, lock the door and just actually write it up in much more detail.
- P And that was often particularly the sort of exchanges maybe between a teacher and a pupil, a child, you know and you just would be able to sort of recapture that again unless you went straight away and it's still in your mind [G: yeah] and again you don't probably capture it absolutely word for word but it comes back to what I was saying before, that the precise words are not always that important – it was the meanings that were clearly there from the teacher and the child which matter so you try and [G: sure] capture that, the essence of that.
- [...]
- P well the other instance, obviously, is in the staffroom [G: yeah] where you can't just take out your notebook in the staffroom because it's obvious that you're taking notes on them so.
- G yeah, so did you make any notes in the staffroom?
- P no.
- G none at all.
- P no, I went to the toilet a few times!

Bob Jeffrey, in contrast, does make notes in both classrooms and in staffrooms, but he explained in the interview that he did not encourage others to read them:

- G How open are your note pads to other people?
- B I don't generally show my working observational pads to people, they couldn't read the writing anyway. I have had people say 'Right let's have a look at them?' Some have tried to grab them in staff rooms, so I am aware of that, and I to some extent therefore I try to be careful about what I write. Therefore there might be other bits that might be added later where I could see I might be challenges. [G: right]. However on the whole, if it might look like a criticism, I try to phrase it as a question.
- G Ok, do you? That's interesting.
- B If I were to hear or see a teacher contradicting herself in the staff room compared to what I'd seen in a classroom, I wouldn't say 'there she is contradicting herself' I might say 'What's the significance of the difference between her action there and her staff room statements?' So I pose quite a lot of questions in the field notes. I don't think it's my place to make any evaluative comments.

[...]

- B Sometimes the children ask ‘Can I read your field notes?’ and then I try to put that off, but they can see the writing and generally it’s not very clear anyway and I say well you can, but it’s not very easy understand, I write very quickly and almost illegibly.
- G Do you do that on purpose?
- B No [joint laughter] it just happens! That’s my handwriting! But it’s useful, in these circumstances, because, sometimes it’s difficult for me to read [laughs].

Lois Weis also finds her poor handwriting has advantages as well as problems:

- L I have very bad hand writing.
- G So do I, Woeful.
- L And I have to tell you that part of it is because I have so much trouble with my hands. But I intentionally, when I was sitting in classrooms, I intentionally kind of ...
- G Made it difficult to read?
- L Made it difficult to read.
- G Ok.
- L And that certainly contributed,
- G Ok.
- L It probably would be bad anyway but at the time, I intentionally made it difficult to read so that people really didn’t know what I was saying.
- G So did anyone ask to look at them?
- L No.

Expanding the notes

Even the most disciplined of ethnographers sometimes fail to live up to their own standards. Perhaps one of the most demanding aspects of fieldwork is the need that most ethnographers feel to expand the notes taken actually in the field into something that is fuller and more structured. Especially where the original notes are just brief, their meaning rapidly disintegrates unless they are expanded quickly after the events.

Paul Connolly admits that his 3000 A4 pages of fieldnotes (the expanded versions of the field fieldnotes) might well have been much longer:

- P I think I sort of captured about half of my notes if I’m being really honest and about half of them [G: yeah]. There should have been maybe 6000 pages there you know so about half of them were just lost [G: yeah] because I didn’t, and I’ve still got boxes in the attic of bundles of those little notebooks all sort of elastic bands round them, that were there, they had the date on them and they were there to expand upon in my fieldnotes, but I never did and when I started looking at them, especially if I left them for a few days, they just didn’t make sense to me any more.
- G It was just all gone?
- P Yeah.
- G Yeah.
- P I mean certainly if it was something significant that I’d realised at the time was significant I’d be writing that up very quickly that night or the night after, so that was there, but for the sort of the routine processes and interactions – a lot of that has gone.

Sara Delamont, however, seems to be more self-disciplined:

- S Those are my field notebooks [G: ok] and I then write into spiral bound A4 books again I only write one side of the paper. I didn't do that properly even with classrooms because I often used to write a lot more because I was in a seated place and it was quite [G: right] but with this fieldwork because the notes are such rubbish because it's so difficult because it's very noisy, very hot, very sweaty, very dangerous, very much interrupted, it's not, I can't write good notes there at all [G: right]. I just can't it's hopeless. I can't write notes to satisfy me. So I go home and I sit down and I immediately write them up into out-of-the-field notebooks.
- [...]
- S Achilles's classes often end with dancing and that's sort of fun and everybody has a few minutes dancing and then everybody goes to the pub and I go home. [G: right] I go home and then I sit at my desk for about two more hours and write it up.
- G It's about two hours?
- S Oh, at least. Probably two hours.
- G Do you always do that?
- S Unless I'm absolutely, absolutely exhausted, I didn't on Wednesday because I didn't get home until 11.15 and I was just too tired, I didn't, I did it last night instead.
- G It was only one day afterwards?
- S Yes.
- G So are you always up to date by the time the next class comes?
- S ... um ... I would say I only haven't been on about two occasions in two years.
- G That's pretty good going.
- [...]
- G Now are they written up so that you can understand them or are they written up so that you can quote from them?
- S They're written up so I can understand them.
- G Ok so if you decided you wanted to talk about a particular incident you couldn't just use those out-of-the-field-notes?
- S I might, I might, it would slightly depend what sort of paper I was writing and for what purpose I think [G: right] if I was trying to write something like *Fieldwork in educational settings* where I actually did a thing where I took the three stages [G: yeah] if I was wanting to do that with the capoeira fieldwork I, or I was trying to write something method-y I might quote that intermediate stage directly. But I don't think, I think if it were a classroom in Britain where I could assume that the people reading knew about classrooms in Britain I probably would more. This actually needs much higher level of explanation [G: it does, pure description, yeah] um and therefore I don't think, I don't think I have written anything up for publication that I haven't started from there and I've put round it, I might have written in the out of the field book 'got to Gladstone's at 8, at 7.50, foul wet night so waited inside' but when I was writing it up for publication will say 'it's a cold November night in Tolnbridge a British city, the streets are largely empty because a nasty cold sleety rain is falling, um traffic goes past, the few on the streets are hurrying but in a nineteenth century shop front, strange noises are coming out into the street' [G: ok].

Bob Jeffrey now uses voice recognition software to expand on most of his notes, but his way of working earlier was more traditional:

- B And then I write up my field notes on computer. What I now use is voice recognition, but I could type them up. In the past I've used the page split into two with an action side of the page and then some comments down the other side of the page, but mostly I write in a form that could be easily read by somebody and then at the same time extracts could be coded for analysis or selected to illustrate analysis in later publications.
- G Right and how quickly do you actually do that? Honestly.

- B [Pause] anything from the following week to the following three months.
- G Right, ok, the nearest are the weeks? [laughs]
- B I used to write them up on the bus going home sometimes, and from the early days I have quite a lot of large books with fieldnotes written up on a bus or train. But the main thing now is to ensure that they end up as computer texts.

Conclusions

The purpose of this article is simply to present some information on how four well-known educational ethnographers write and make use of fieldnotes. It would be presumptuous to draw too many conclusions. However, for all four the basic task is the same – to record as much as possible of what is perceived to be relevant to the research project so that there is a record that can be used later in the analysis and writing process. All recognise the limitations of memory and seek to record what they see and hear.

The first interesting finding is that the four do not have a common language to describe what they do when they are writing fieldnotes. Second, what they actually do depends on context and personal preferences, so that in some situations it is felt difficult or uncomfortable to take notes, while in other situations they feel able to make open notes. But individual ethnographers can feel more or less comfortable making notes in what are essentially similar situations.

This paper is just a start to a wider discussion of the role of fieldnotes in ethnography, and a resource for those who may be new to ethnography.

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Appendix 1. What I do: thoughts at leisure. A further note by Sara Delamont

In the actual site (classroom, hockey pitch, or hospital ward, and in this research, Gym or dojo) I record (A) in the Reporters’ Notebooks

(1) Time – I put the time every 5–10 minutes all through the obs., and note the time when a break or change occurs: e.g.,

9.06 Pay break
9.09 Lecture

(2) (Counting) Personnel. I count the total no. of students. I count males and females, and in this research I count who is in what kit (e.g., full uniform, mixed, all civvies), including who is in what type of T-shirt.

I count who of the regulars is present and who is not.

I record who pairs up with whom for practice and in the *roda* and for dancing.

I count ‘race’: i.e., how many Chinese, how many African Caribbeans.

(3) Space

I draw the setting the first time I am there – and at any special events – and I record in words the use of the space – e.g., ‘all to the far end’ or ‘circled at the mid point’ or ‘beginners to the stage’ or whatever.

(4) I write down all the public speech verbatim – all the teacher’s public speech, plus anything said out loud by students or me.

(5) I record what anyone says to me (afterwards) (e.g., ‘Habiscus said to me that she had forgotten to bring Lunghri’s book *again*’ or Achilles said to me ‘Oh Bruxa, they don’t look’).

(6) I record what CD is on, and what songs the live musicians (the *Bateria*) play erratically (i.e., when and if it seems to matter). If my ear were better I’d record which of the 5 rhythms the bateria are playing – but I can’t always tell. I record who sings the solos – especially when it is students.

(7) I record who hugs whom, including me ‘e.g., Lunghri arrived, hugged X, Y, Z and me’.

(8) I record what instruments have been brought by whom e.g., ‘Ikki arrives with the club drum and 2 *berimbaus*’, ‘Now there are 6 *berimbaus* leaning on the bench’.

(B) In the A4 Out of the Field Books

I write up the one-word, scrappy, abbreviated scribble into a longhand, grammatical narrative account – it has the same structure, and the same emphasis on time, space, people in the same narrative order.

I also add things that happen between classes – i.e., if I meet a student in Tescos who says ‘Hey – I’ve found a CD of *forro* – do you want to borrow it?’ or ‘Talbot has broken his ankle at his trapeze class’ or ‘Calypso has emailed from Rio’. I’ll write that up in the A4 Book when I get home.

I’ll also record all conversations with Neil and Rodrigo – whether by email, phone or face to face.

I might put analytic memos into that book – but usually those go into the 3rd set of books – (see below).

If I made a ‘mistake’ in the field notes – e.g., I wrote 8.40 No Neil and he arrives at 8.43 I’d only record 8.43 ‘Neil arrived’ in the out of the field book.

My field notes are very impersonal – very factual. My write up in the A4 Out of the Field books are more reflexive. I’ll put:

It was lovely spring evening: I got there at 7.45 and waited outside with X, Y and Z arrived and hugged me: Professor B, passing on the other side of the road, looked a bit surprised when I waved.

or

My notes on the *roda* were dreadful tonight – because there were only 15 students there – I stood in the *roda* the whole time and made no notes. I am always torn between the need to keep the *axe* in the *roda* and the need to write decent notes – still I’ve seen 87 *rodas*, and I followed my instinct ...

(C) A5 spiral-bound Sized Book

This is used as a field diary. It is used for reflection and for remembering ideas that occur to me.

(D) Pink Reporters' Books

These have: Titles, Pseudonyms, and bibliographic things I need to trace.

(E) Other documents

I have at home – a big ring binder with the Cloisterham and Tolnbridge club emails in, a second ring binder of email correspondence with individual students and teachers. Plus a box file of ephemera, like posters, flyers, pages from Time Out, Press Cuttings. Plus box files of offprints.