

Informative title describing the type of research-based teaching (FBU)

Online cooperative reflection during ethnographic fieldwork

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Subject, course/other context, study level and number of students

Ethnographic fieldwork and analysis is a mandatory 30 ECTS course taking place during the 3rd semester of the two-year MSc program. Approximately 80 master students follow the course each year. The ability to create, collect, and analyze ethnographic data material in interaction with participants and conditioned by their worldviews is considered crucial in the formation of the next generation of anthropologists.

The motivation behind the activity

Fieldwork is the main reason for students' delay in study progress in the master program.¹ Students spent more than a year analyzing their material and writing up their thesis. They often feel isolated during fieldwork and some return home due to psychic strain.

Key learning outcomes, focusing on the way in which the activity is research-based

Main learning outcomes for students are to learn to collect empirical material, with which they can answer their research questions, and to reflect analytically *during* rather than *after* fieldwork. In order to meet the objectives students are expected to work as part of a team even if they work on different projects. The intention is to stimulate *cooperative reflection* (Bundgaard & Rubow 2016).

Description of the activity

Before beginning to develop the fieldwork online activities, we formulated three key objectives. The first objective was to lessen the feeling of loneliness and performance related insecurity amongst students during fieldwork. The second objective was to increase analytical reflection during fieldwork in order to make it realistic to complete the master program within the scheduled two years. The third objective was to facilitate the possibility for students to draw on the skills of co-students not least through *cooperative reflection*.

The first experiment took place in autumn 2014. All students signed up for fieldwork were invited to participate. The volunteers were introduced to the teaching platform and divided into groups of approximately four students with no explicit criteria regarding theme, region, gender, or degree of commitment. The online elements are of two kinds. One is structured around regular assignments intended to improve the quality of the ethnographic material and

¹ In 2012 Master students of anthropology spent three and a half years in order to complete the two-year program. Conversations with students clearly showed that fieldwork was the main factor causing delay.

to stimulate students' reflection upon their work process in order to move forward analytically.

Before the fixed deadline, students are expected to upload 1-3 pages of reflection on specific aspects of their fieldwork. Team members and the teacher have one week to give feedback. Students are encouraged to respond with a constructive critical approach meant to stimulate further reflection and thus progress in the work process.

Assignments focus on the craft of ethnographic fieldwork. During the early stage of their fieldwork, students are asked to discuss gatekeepers and participants, observations and/or interviews, and share a field note. Later they have to present preliminary themes in their material and, when back in the department, they are asked to formulate a tentative argument for their thesis.

The other kind of online activity is inspired by a tradition in the department for social activities centred on an anthropological issue. The activities are known as Café SoFa (short for 'socialt-faglig') to signal the informal character of this forum. As far as the online Café SoFa is concerned students are free to bring up any issue related to their fieldwork they wish to discuss also of a more personal character. Students who carry out fieldwork in places where they do not have access to the internet must write the regular written reflective assignments, which make up part of the course exam but will not benefit from feedback.

Interplay between teaching and exam

The exam is a portfolio consisting of the assignments uploaded during the course. Students are encouraged to follow up on the feedback from team members and the teacher and edit the assignments before they hand in the portfolio.

The outcome of the activity for the students

Three of the five groups, which participated in the online community autumn 2014, functioned very well and all participants explicitly stated that they would not have been without their team. Reading team members' field note excerpts and reflections helped students reflect on their own work and stimulated experimenting with method as well as style. They also found it valuable to be able to discuss issues, which require familiarity with ethnographic fieldwork. For some students the activity did not have the intended effect. Two teams suffered because of some team members' lack of engagement. Never the less they benefitted from their regular written reflections and feedback from the teacher.

The outcome for research

The main outcome of the activity so far has been didactic. Drawing on the experiences from each cohort of students the course is continuously developed and the number of students and teachers who wish to participate has steadily increased. As far as research output is

concerned the activity has raised a number of stimulating questions related to learning communities and cooperative reflection complementing a series of teaching based research experiments which explored the advantages and limits of different kinds of ethnographic fieldwork (see the activity described by Cecilie Rubow , <http://fbu.ku.dk/english/examples/field-work-research-internship.pdf>).

Strengths and weaknesses of the activity

The experiments demonstrate that engagement is crucial in creating a well-functioning online community (Salmon 2011). At its best, the learning community becomes a point of departure for *cooperative reflection* (Bundgaard & Rubow in press). However, other aspects matter too, the most important perhaps being the careful formulation of questions which stimulate students to reflect on their work. The strength in the activity lies in encouraging reflection as well as cooperation. The latter, however, also represents a weakness depending on the engagement of team members. One answer to this potential problem is to consider the degree to which students are willing to engage when forming teams.

Further information

Bundgaard & Rubow (2016) From rite of passage to a mentored educational activity: Fieldwork for master's students of anthropology in LATISS in print.

Salmon, Gilly. (2011) *E-Moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online*. Psychology Press.

Key words

Cooperative reflection; Collaborative fieldwork; ethnographic fieldwork; master's fieldwork, teaching-based research