**SAGE Research Method Case Education Case Title**

Researching Educational Transition Using Ethnography

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**Keywords**

Ethnography, insider perspective, subjectivity, ethics

**Relevant Disciplines**

Education, Psychology

**Methods Used**

Semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, observations, document analysis

**Academic Level**

Intermediate Undergraduate

**Contributor Biographies**

Lynda Turner has worked in education since 1992, originally teaching in sixth forms and further education colleges before moving to higher education in 2005. She completed her Doctorate in Education, which focused on student transition to Higher Education in 2013 and is currently a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Huddersfield.

Jane Tobbell is a University Teaching Fellow at The University of Huddersfield and has been working in higher education for over 20 years. Her research centres on transitions between educational institutions and learning in organisations.

**Abstract**

This account describes my research experiences as a doctoral student in education, seeking to understand what transition to Higher Education was like for undergraduate students. I was supported throughout the process by my colleague and supervisor Dr Jane Tobbell. I conducted ethnographic research and the case study provides an account of the methods used in both data collection and analysis. It also considers the challenges of subjectivity, especially in relation to educational research. The pros and cons of researching in your own community are discussed.

**Learning Outcomes**

By the end of the case students should be able to

* Understand the data collection methods used in an ethnography
* Consider some of the pros and cons of insider perspective in research
* Examine the nature of subjectivity in qualitative research

**Case Study**

**Getting started**

My research looked at undergraduate students’ transition into Higher Education. I became interested in the nature of transition from one educational establishment to another as a consequence of my own experiences. I became a lecturer in adult education in 1992 and taught at all levels in Further Education (F.E.) including GCSE, NVQ and A Level. I became the Assistant Head of a large Access programme in an F.E. college before eventually gaining a position as a full time lecturer in H.E. on the proviso that I would complete a part time doctorate. None of my previous teaching experiences prepared me for the culture shock I encountered during my first year of full time work in a university. The educational landscape was so different, I was reminded of Grandin’s (1995) phrase when describing her own sense of alienation from day to day social practices. I was “an anthropologist on Mars.” This was not a reflection on my relationships with colleagues, many of whom were friendly and supportive. Rather, the educational practices and the culture of the academy were difficult to grasp, because they were so different from the school and F.E. community. I was a confident, resilient and experienced teacher but the adjustment to this new planet was disorienting and I often felt uncertain and anxious. This made me think about what the transition experience was like for undergraduate students. My doctoral research interest was established but immediately raised a methodological question. Subjectivity is concerned with how a person’s judgment is shaped by their own personal opinions and feelings. Is it possible to establish authenticity and authority in research if our analysis can be swayed by our experiences? How could I be certain that my positioning of educational transition as problematic was not simply a reflection of my own inability to settle in a new community? Issues of authenticity and authority are particularly pertinent in educational research because as Gordon et al (2001) point out all researchers will have necessarily experienced some form of education as a participant. To address some of these concerns, I undertook a thorough literature review and the large body of research on educational transition helped to reassure me that uncertainty in moving between different educational communities was not a unique experience.

**Underpinning theory of learning**

As a psychologist, I was interested in a theoretical explanation of the phenomena. The overarching framework I used to understand educational transition was Lave and Wenger’s (1991) Communities of Practice theory. They see learning as a social phenomenon and consider the role of the educational culture, social relationships, tools and representational media in shaping participation in learning. Learning is not merely the acquisition of skills and knowledge but instead arises from interaction with the socially and culturally constructed world. This involves coming to terms with the rules, documents, images, tools, symbols, roles and language which shape a community. It can also include tacit conversations, underlying assumptions and shared perceptions. When we enter new places we need time to understand and negotiate the practices necessary to function within the new community. We also need to identify and experience the valued practices of the new community. Students’ identities are fragile during transition, particularly if the valued practices in the old and the new community are quite different. It became clear that research into the student experience therefore needed to encompass multiple methods of data collection to gain understanding of the explicit and implicit practices of the learning environment and to consider how these shape the transition experience.

The dominant methodology in the Community of Practice literature is ethnography as it enables the researcher to participate in some way in the lives of educators and students. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p3) give the following definition of ethnography

*In terms of data collection, ethnography usually involves the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts – in fact gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of enquiry.*

**Insider/outsider perspective or myth?**

I made a pragmatic decision to conduct the research in my own work place. Given that I was combining a full time job with part time research, investigating my own community seemed like a time effective way forward. Bonner and Tolhurst (2001) argue that in qualitative research it is increasingly common for researchers to be part of the social group they intend to study. There are a number of benefits to this so called “insider perspective”. Clearly it was easier for me to gain access, acceptance, trust and co-operation from my colleagues. I also had the advantage of knowledge and understanding about the local conditions, jargon and culture within the Department. Pugh et al. (2000) argue that familiarity with practice is important when research is concerned with an examination of process rather than outcome. In terms of Lave and Wenger’s CoP theory I already had some understanding of the underlying assumptions and shared perceptions. However, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) see the comfortable sense of being “at home” as a danger signal and claim there must be some social and intellectual distance for the analytic work of the ethnographer to occur. The “threat” of subjectivity looms again! The notion that objectivity and emotional distance are essential to conduct valid research on a given group has been described as an “outsider myth”. In terms of the insider/outsider debate Naples (2003) claims that the distinction sets up a false separation between researcher and researched which neglects the interactive processes involved. In my own case, I was a member of the academic community I researched. I was not an undergraduate in the department and therefore had an outsider perspective on undergraduate student experience, although I had previously been an undergraduate at a different university. I was also a part time post graduate student in another department, the research was for my Doctorate in Education. I had my own professional experience of transition from college into H.E. lecturing. My relationships within and between each of these communities were continually negotiated and renegotiated in fluid, shifting relationships between different groups of people and across time.

**Ethical issues**

The research was subject to a university ethics committee. Briefing information and consent forms were prepared for both staff and students although the phrasing of the information was slightly different for each so that the language was accessible to the different parties. For example the word “ethnography” was not used in the information given to the undergraduate students. I also explained to the undergraduates that participation in the research would not contribute to credits on the degree programme or affect their marks in anyway. I advised participants that I would not mark any academic work submitted by them for the duration of the research. I arranged with my line manager not to have any teaching contact with this cohort of 1st year undergraduate students during the year of data collection to minimise any role conflict. This conflict is something to consider when conducting research in your own community.

I discussed my proposed research with staff at a Divisional meeting and gained broad support from attendees. I later consulted with individual staff members about sessions I wanted to observe to ensure I had a reasonable representation of the types of teaching and staff student contact across the 1st year of the course. All staff members approached agreed to my request. However, it is worth noting that it may have been difficult to refuse a request from a colleague which is perhaps another issue with so called insider research.

In terms of the observational data collected, individual staff and students were not identified by name. Teaching took place in a public forum, where being observed by others could not be avoided, and my presence was openly acknowledged so it was not necessary to gain written consent from everyone in the lecture theatre.

In accordance with the British Psychological Society ethical guidelines the following precautions were taken:

* Informed consent from students and staff
* Anonymity – names of the students and staff were changed. The location of the university was described as Northern.
* Right of withdrawal – ongoing vigilance in terms of consent. For example during a break in a seminar observation a tutor advised me that my presence was making her feel nervous, so I left.
* Data protection – all data was kept in a locked cabinet in my office, all the electronic data was password protected and the data was destroyed at the end of the project
* Respect for individuals – withholding judgements and not demanding time and resources
* Debriefing

For both students and staff taking part I felt it was important to stress that the aims of the research would not involve judging or assigning values to either people or contexts. Instead, the aim was to develop a ‘true to life’ picture of the practices that shape people’s worlds. The work was based on the principle that much of learning is about participating in the practices which a particular environment requires. However, this created some ethical dilemmas during data collection. For example, one module on the course provided all the reading material, which on the face of it looked like an enabling practice. During interviews with students it became apparent that they struggled to understand the complex terms used and as a consequence began to doubt their own ability. The ethnographer has to consider what they intend to do about any potentially disabling practices observed. In the example given, I decided it was appropriate to suggest the production of reading guidelines during a Departmental meeting so that the community as a whole could discuss the practice. Intervention and reporting of findings are tricky paths to negotiate, perhaps more so when conducting research in your own backyard.

**Data collection**

**Observations**

To explore the everyday experiences of lecturers and students, I used participant observations. I observed all of the three day induction process at the start of the year, and a selection of lectures and group work within the Department in Term 1. This amounted to 36 hours of observations.

Because I wanted to record everything that happened during my observations I decided to make contemporaneous notes. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) have provided a checklist for observers which I adopted during my observations. They recommended that field notes should include

1. Space – the physical place or places
2. Actors – the people involved
3. Activity – a set of related acts that people do
4. Object – the physical things that are present
5. Time – the sequencing that takes place over time
6. Event – the set of related activities that people do
7. Act – single actions that people do
8. Goal – the things people are trying to accomplish
9. Feeling – the emotions expressed

**Example of field notes**

**Space :** Large tiered lecture theatre which seats 250 students

**Actors:** A Lecturer in Social Psychology. She has seven years of experience of teaching this module and is employed full time. 167 first year undergraduate students, two technicians

**Activity:** Lecture presentation on Social Groups by tutor with students listening and note taking

**Objects:** Screen for Powerpoint presentation, lectern, computer and microphone. Pull down seats and continuous wooden desks across each tier. Desks are full with students’ bags, coats, folders and notes.

**Time:** Monday morning 9.15 – 11.15 with a 15 minute break. This is the first lecture of the day and the week.

**Event:**  Fifth lecture in a series of ten on Social Psychology. The third time this lecturer has delivered a lecture to this group.

**Acts:** The lecturer is stood at the front behind the lectern. Students are seated. The projector is not connecting to the computer so there is no Powerpoint display. The lecturer is waiting for someone to arrive to look at it. She advises the students she will wait for ten minutes to see if the technology can be fixed. She asks students how many have the lecture notes with them – about 50%. She reminds students that they should be downloading and printing the notes to help with their learning. The lecture theatre is noisy with lots of chatting. Two technicians arrive and start to work on the problem. Individual students are approaching the lecturer and asking her questions. The lecture theatre is quite warm. The front rows are empty.

**Goal:** Teaching and learning. Students will be assessed by essay on one topic in the series.

**Feelings:** Students have met the lecturer before and the atmosphere is quite relaxed, especially given the technological problems.

I also wrote a log at the end of each day to capture any information that was missed during note taking in situ. I tried to type up the observation notes as they were collected each week whilst my memory of the event was still fresh, although my own workload meant that this was not possible at times. I do not, in any way, claim that my notes captured all the actions, conversations and behaviours of the research context and at times it was not possible to record everything that was being said or done. This was particularly so during large lectures.

I wanted to also explore the individual transition journey to gain an understanding of the practices engaged in by the students outside the lecture theatre or classroom, such as using the Computing and Library Services or social spaces on the Campus. My participants agreed to allow me to join them, intermittently, throughout their day although this proved problematic in terms of organising times when we were both available. However, other students offered to participate in this area of data collection. For example, two students were searching for literature using the University search engine in the library when I was looking for books. They invited me to watch and record their efforts. I made it clear that I would be using the information as part of my data collection and asked them to sign consent forms. Following my observation I also advised them where they could get support in developing these skills on campus.

**Interviews**

I approached the entire cohort of 1st year undergraduate students at the start of induction week to explain what I was doing and ask for participants in the research. In particular I told them I was looking for interview participants who were prepared to talk to me about their transition experiences. It was anticipated that the interview would last for about an hour and occur twice over the academic year. I advised them that I was hoping to interview a mixture of the different types of student on the course, ranging from direct entrants, to A level and Access students. I asked anyone who was interested in taking part to email me for an informal chat about the research aims and what their participation might be. I also attended their first lecture of the term as an observer and as well as alerting the students to my presence, I repeated the request for participants. Ten students agreed to be interviewed although one of these subsequently decided not to participate.

I decided to undertake interviews with my participants. The rationale for interviewing was to further understand the participants and also to gain additional information that was not available through observation. The initial contact discussion took place in my office at the university campus. I went through the consent forms with the participants individually at different times over a one week period and answered any questions that they had. I advised them that I would contact them by email during Term 1 to make arrangements to interview them or accompany them to a lecture. I also explained that I would like to interview them a second time towards the end of the 2nd term and that this might be either singly or in a focus group. The participants were shown the interview schedule containing the topic areas I was interested in and asked if they wanted to add anything to the schedule. None of the participants did. They were also advised that they could talk about topics which were not currently on the schedule during the interview as I was interested in the practices that were important to them. Following this, participants were contacted by email with three possible dates and times for the interview to take place. I used their timetable to ensure that these arrangements did not clash with any teaching contact or require them to come in on an additional day when they were not being taught. They were also asked to suggest an alternative if none of these arrangements were suitable.

Interviews took place in a small, quiet room used for this research purpose on campus at different times throughout Term 1. This meant that some participants were interviewed early in their transition to H.E whilst other interviews took place towards the end of Term 1. The interviews were semi-structured. An interview schedule was used to gain a detailed picture of my participant’s accounts of transition. Questions were devised to ask about the academic practices of their pre H.E. educational experiences and also about their transition experiences. This gives the researcher much more flexibility than the more conventional structured interview or questionnaire. It allows the interviewer to follow up any interesting avenues that emerge in the interview so that the participant can give a fuller picture of what is important to them. In constructing the questions I tried to avoid jargon and use open rather than closed questions to encourage the participants to open up about their experiences. However, as the Term progressed and I had observed some of the academic practices in the Department, I also used some of these observations in my interviews with participants. In this way the interview process and my interview skills developed over time.

A focus group interview took place at the end of the academic year although only four participants in total took part in these due to the demands of work, family commitments or holidays. This time I adopted a time line approach to the interview, asking students to reflect on critical incidents (both positive and negative) in their first year at university. I hoped this would facilitate a more open and fluid account of their transition than a semi structured approach. It would also allow students to decide what was important to them rather than answering questions around themes I felt were pertinent.

I digitally recorded and transcribed both types of interview. Each participant was given a copy of the transcript and asked to confirm that this was an accurate reflection of our conversation. Participants were advised they could remove any or all parts of the transcript without explanation. None of the participants requested any changes to their transcripts. My participants appeared to enjoy the process and made a connection with the research methods they were being taught on the course and their own contribution to research.

**Conversations**

Silverman (2000) pointed out that “much of what we observe in formal and informal settings will inevitably consist of conversations” (p821). Talk has been increasingly recognised as the primary medium through which social interaction takes place. Whilst this is often referred to in the ethnography literature as unstructured interviewing, conversations are casual, unplanned and informal and so quite different from the notion of questioning and answering in any type of interview. In this research I recorded (in note form) casual encounters and conversations I heard during the course of data collection which seemed relevant to the aims of the research. This included conversations I had with staff both formally and informally (always with the staff member’s agreement.) On three occasions I was visited in my office by students who knew I was interested in transition research who wanted to talk to me about a specific transition experience. For example, one student was concerned with his essay writing skill. I asked him if I could make notes about the things he was concerned about and use this as data. I also directed him to the academic skills tutor for more support in essay writing. I asked these students to sign a consent form.

**Document analysis**

In addition, I collected documents such as assignment briefs, module handbooks, feedback forms and lecture notes. Publicly available information was also gathered about the University such as strategic plans, mission statements. I also collected A level specifications to compare curriculum content. These methods enabled the collection of data about the CoP and also helped to foster understanding of the collective experience of transition. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) stated that document analysis is an often overlooked area in investigations of social practices. The production of “paperwork” is a major preoccupation in certain social settings. It provides the ethnographer with “a rich vein of analytic topics, as well as valuable sources of data and information” (p132.) Documents are made and used in accordance with organisational routines and often depend on shared cultural assumptions to be understood. Although official documents have anonymity which might lead readers to see them as factual, objective statements, their production is a social activity. For example university rules and regulations are indicators of valued practices within the academic community itself.

**Ethnographic analysis**

Qualitative research provides many analytic opportunities. In the current study I employed narrative analysis in constructing a story of transition from the observational data collected. I then used thematic analysis as the main means of recognizing patterns within the narratives, interviews and documents collected. My choices were guided by the notions of community and practices and considering how these practices may have emerged, so that a theoretical thematic analysis was my main method of analysis. This is not to say that there are a number of other factors which are important in understanding identity and transition such as ethnicity, gender and socio-economic status. My analysis did not focus explicitly on these but I do not deny their importance.

In constructing a narrative of transition I kept in mind Wenger’s (1998) use of vignettes. Wenger told the story of Ariel, a claims processor, by constructing an account of a typical week to illustrate the practices which mediated participation in her work place. I found the vignette a powerful and accessible way of gaining access to Ariel’s working life. I wanted my transition narratives to also give the reader insight into what happened to students in their first term in Higher Education and so I wrote a vignette from my observational notes, representing the first few weeks of studying in Higher Education. Bochner (2001) suggests that narratives can model theorizing and living, providing a tool to think about the story but also, importantly, to think with it. The narratives were therefore not just a way of representing the data collected but also a means of analysis and engaging the reader.

The data from interviews and documents were then drawn upon to further identify themes. In deciding to undertake a theoretical thematic analysis I chose to accept a less rich description of the data overall and instead undertake a more detailed analysis of some aspects of the data, in effect looking for valued practices within the data and reflecting on how these influenced participation and identity.

In working with my interview data, the process of transcription itself was the first step to becoming familiar with the data. I jotted down ideas and potential coding schemes whilst transcribing data. I also reviewed my observational field notes at the end of each data collection week, making notes on enabling or disabling practices seen. In this way, writing was as an integral part of the analysis rather than something which took place at the end.

During document analysis, the process of reading and re-reading allowed me to become familiar with the data and again I made notes on the documents considering the practices demonstrated. Using Hammersley and Atkinson’s recommendations I also considered the following questions:

* How are documents written?
* How are they read?
* Who writes them?
* Who reads them?
* For what purposes?
* What does the reader need to know in order to make sense of them?

In the second phase, I began to organize the data into meaningful groups using four specific questions linked to my theoretical perspective. I asked:

* Which practices seem to enable participation?
* Which practices seem to disable participation?
* How does practice impact on learner identity?
* How does practice impact on teacher identity

This enabled me to work systematically through the data and identify repeated patterns and contradictory codes across the data set. I coded the data by writing notes on the texts I was analyzing, generating initial codes by using the specific questions generated. I then copied extracts of the data and collated each code in a separate computer file. I looked for ways in which different codes might combine to form overarching themes, referring to the narrative data for further confirmation. At this stage I used a large sheet of paper to produce a thematic map of the codes and their connections. This also helped me to form themes and consider the connections between themes. The themes were then reviewed to see whether there was enough data to support them or whether themes could be combined. I did not discard themes by considering their prevalence. Instead I concentrated on how key the theme was in capturing something important for the overall research questions. I returned to the entire data set to review whether the themes reflected the meanings in the data set as a whole. I also looked for any data which may have been missed from the earlier coding stage. Once I had a satisfactory map of my themes I began to consider the way that I could present the data. At this stage it became clear to me that I needed to consider teaching and learning as one overarching central theme and assessment as another. This allowed me to organize the themes into a coherent and internally consistent account. I also began the process of giving the themes names to allow the reader an immediate sense of what the theme was about. My interpretation of the data was therefore clearly framed by my theoretical socio-cultural framework.

**Conclusion**

Conducting ethnographic research is a time consuming and fascinating experience. The methodology raises many issues around subjectivity and requires ongoing ethical consideration throughout the data collection and analysis. I hope this account of my research journey has given some insight and understanding of the whole complex and messy process!

**Discussion Questions**

1. What would you do to explore subjectivity in your own research?
2. Do you agree that the analysis described represents ethnographic research?
3. How would you respond to any ethical issues (such as observation of poor practice) which emerged during observational data collection?
4. What are the main advantages and disadvantages of research in your own community?
5. What are the main differences between a semi structured and a time line interview?

**Further Reading**

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