

Student/staff ‘Collaborative Event Ethnography’ at the Antiques Roadshow

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Introduction

This project report details the experiences of a student/staff collaborative research project carried out in the summer of 2016 and using the Collaborative Event Ethnography (CEE) method developed by Brosius and Campbell. Adopting the CEE approach, undergraduate anthropology students, working alongside postgraduates and research staff, collected ethnographic data through interviews and participant observation at the Antiques Roadshow at Ightham Mote in Kent. They engaged in data-coding and analysis, with opportunities for further involvement in collaborative writing and dissemination of findings.

Our project demonstrates both the value of CEE as a method for gathering academically-robust ethnographic data at large-scale, time-limited events and also its potential as a pedagogical tool for fine-tuning the development of research skills. We find that engaging in the production – alongside seasoned researchers – of academically-rigorous knowledge with ‘real’ research outcomes delivers added value to the research training experience for student participants.

Collaborative Event Ethnography is a methodological approach designed to capture a comprehensive overview of large-scale meetings. It was initially developed to explore the multiple, simultaneous interactions taking place at large international conservation forums:

“For a researcher, the logistical constraints on studying such an event, and making sense of what is seen, are considerable. It is simply impossible for any single individual to gain a broader analytical perspective on the events unfolding before them as these meetings proceed apace. To overcome these constraints, we adopted a multisited ethnographic approach, wherein researchers followed people, things, metaphors, or conflicts across sites” (Campbell and Brosius, 2010, p. 247)

The CEE method utilises ethnographic teams of researchers, co-operating to capture a holistic overview of an event. *“Rather than relying on participant observation by individual scholars, CEE uses teams of researchers to observe and to take notes, audio recordings, and photographs, which provide a much richer overall picture”* (Duffy, 2014, p. 126).

¹ The Goldsmiths Ethnography of the Antiques Road Show (GEARS) Collective are a team of researchers including students and staff. The collective consists of (in alphabetic order by first name) Alexandra Urdea, Aliche Bridget, Angie Yensuang, Claire Calvagna, Cy Elliott Smith, Elena Liber, Emily Fenna Caldwell, Faye Lench, Gavin Weston, Helen Cornish, Henrike Neuhaus, Katie Burton, Lowri Evans, Lucia Saiz Corsin, Marla Greenway, Martin Webb, Natalie Djohari, Nicholas Montebello, Olly Bellamy, Robbie Wojciechowski, Will Cundill, William Tantam. We should like to thank the members of the Antiques Roadshow team, who were immensely helpful throughout. We should like to give special thanks to (Executive Producer) Simon Shaw and Rebecca Viale (production coordinator) for all their help before and during the research. This research was funded by Goldsmiths Teaching and Learning Innovation Centre (TaLIC) and we should like to give special thanks to Donovan Synmoie of TaLiC for his support throughout the research and in our continuing endeavours to take student/staff collaborative research further.

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In their first use of it, Campbell and Brosius deployed a team of twenty-two researchers to the Fourth World Conservation Congress in Barcelona, in 2008. Working together, they were able to cover multiple sites so that they could “*better understand both the formal and informal nature of conservation policy-making in this international forum*” (Campbell and Brosius, 2010, p. 246). In a subsequent study at the Tenth Conference of the Parties (COP10) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), they adopted CEE to deploy an inter-disciplinary team of research staff and students to capture what went on in the central conference, as well as in related activities at the 320 simultaneously-occurring side events organised by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), governments, research groups and inter-governmental organisations (Campbell *et al*, 2014, p. 8). This comprehensive approach would not have been possible for an ethnographer working alone.

Whilst CEE appears to be gaining traction within environmental research, it has not yet achieved the methodological cross-over we believe it deserves in the social sciences. CEE addresses both a distinct empirical and pedagogical concern: firstly, ethnography, associated as it is with the actions of the ‘lone’ ethnographer, has the potential for myopic accounts based on a single participant’s experiences that are not suited to large scale, time-limited events; secondly, undergraduate and postgraduate training in ethnography, particularly for anthropology students, is often a sink-or-swim moment. Students can be ill-prepared for the realities of fieldwork by lectures, workshops and class-based projects, for they often find themselves confronting problems in the field on their own – away from their supervisors.

Ethnography as a fieldwork-based practice has its roots in the work of the anthropologists Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski. For anthropologists, it is often quite hard to think of ethnography – with its central conceits of long-term fieldwork, detailed fieldnotes and participant observation – as anything other than the endeavour of a lone anthropologist. Certainly, ethnographic pairings do exist – often unified through marriage or close colleagues – and it is not uncommon to find ethnographers working as part of inter-disciplinary teams in applied fields such as international development, medicine or product development. Nonetheless, it is rare to encounter academic teams of ethnographers working together in a single field site. Whilst anthropologists such as Alma Gottlieb (1995) have advocated a shift from the ‘lonely anthropologist’ to team ethnography, such ideas are not mainstream and have done little to shift the preconceptions of fieldwork as a solo pursuit.

This lone-wolf idealisation in anthropology also results in a tendency towards a hands-off introduction to fieldwork. Whilst small group projects are not unusual as first forays into anthropology, the most common first experience of ethnographic fieldwork is a self-generated piece of research in which students design and execute their research at a distance – pedagogically and often geographically – from their supervisor. Though this ‘in-at-the-deep-end’ approach has produced many metaphorical swimmers, it can also be a profoundly isolating experience, as Pollard (2009) notes in her research on PhD fieldworkers from anthropology: “*Almost all interviewees described feeling alone during their fieldwork [...] Even those doing fieldwork in their ‘home’ countries described their feeling of isolation*” (Pollard 2009, p. 4). We are not necessarily calling for a revolution in first fieldwork experiences, but the first forays into the field for students at undergraduate, Masters and PhD level could be approached differently: something more akin to partnership makes more sense:

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“partnership in learning and teaching represents a sophisticated and effective approach to student engagement because it offers the potential for a more authentic engagement with the nature of learning itself and the possibility for genuinely transformative learning experiences for all of those involved” (Healey et al., 2014, p. 55).

Throughout the design of a project, the fieldwork and the subsequent outputs, attempts have been made to make student influence integral to the project’s shape, so as to ensure that *“all involved stand to gain” (ibid., p. 36)*. Through CEE projects, departments and research units can deploy large collaborative teams to produce innovative, rigorous research while also offering students the valuable pedagogical experience of participating in meaningful research partnerships alongside experienced staff.

Choosing a field site

Early in the Autumn of 2015 term, Dr Gavin Weston put out a call within the Anthropology Department at Goldsmiths College for participants willing to engage in a piece of collaborative student/staff research using the Collaborative Event Ethnography framework. The call was open to staff, PhD students, Masters students and undergraduates. The project intended to benefit participants across all levels of their career and education by providing opportunities to further their research experience, increase their repertoire of field methods, train in NVivo software and analysis and produce academic publications. After an initial recruitment meeting (attended by around forty students and staff) a first workshop was set up to decide on a topic.

On 9th December 2015, some thirty students met to decide a research topic. The nature of the research and the limitations the method imposed – including constraints regarding time, cost, size of venue and access – were all thoroughly discussed before small groups went off to brainstorm ideas. They needed to identify events to be held at a time that fitted with our academic calendars (Easter holiday or the summer post-exam period) and in places we could reach by minibus or public transport, with the prerequisite level of accessibility for a group of up to thirty people and the potential for the group to gather data with academic potential. The subsequent suggestions included Comicon, Lambeth County Fair, Lewisham People’s Day, Vapour Lover UK, Woolwich Carnival, Mind/Body/Spirit wellbeing festivals, Marxism 2016, the V&A Museum of Childhood’s Oliver Postgate exhibit, Toilet Tours, Premier Dart League, Holi and a lost luggage auction. Through a crowd-Googleing exercise, we found dates, venues, entry costs and other details about each proposed site. We then discussed the pragmatics of each with regard to time, cost and the concerns listed above. A vote on the final shortlist identified the Antiques Roadshow as easily the most popular. At the end of the session, we agreed that Dr Weston would contact the producers to check the viability of the planned research and, if successful, we would meet again in the Spring term for a research-design workshop.

Preparation

Through regular contact with the show’s executive producer, Simon Shaw, Dr Weston gained consent and negotiated the pragmatics and limitations of the research. This included, but was not limited to: the need to avoid recording names of members of the public interviewed for the research; avoiding photos of members of the public; researchers’ wearing

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laneyards; a prior-approval agreement on any publications, which in turn led to reduced social media use. Simon Shaw also provided us with a pre-emptive sense of what to expect (lots of queuing, logistics of arrival and the ebbs and flows of the day) which helped to shape our project, as well as putting us in contact with others in his team.

In March 2016, we held a research-design workshop to discuss these practical concerns and identify potential research themes. We anticipated as the primary objects of our study the biographies of objects, queuing, value and valuation and the event itself; we designed the research accordingly. Through discussion, we decided that five researchers would bring items and go, alongside the general public, through the full participant experience of queuing and having their objects evaluated. The rest of the group would divide tasks throughout the day, so as to experience a mix of zone-marked observations and interviewing – of such various groups as the public, crew, Ightham Mote volunteers and the show's experts (although opportunities to interview the latter were limited as they were busy). A map we received from the production team at a later date helped us do this in a more targeted way. We collectively identified a list of questions we wanted to ask, but leaned towards semi-structured interviews, during which we might shift our focus towards other interesting themes as and when they arose.

A final pre-fieldwork workshop ensured that we were all methodologically prepared. We discussed interview techniques, recording devices, standardising of fieldnotes (especially in the light of using NVivo afterwards), good fieldwork practice, the schedule for the day and the 'dos and don'ts' of our particular field site.

Collaborative Event Ethnography in action

On the 16th June 2016, we travelled to Ightham Mote in Kent. The final number of participants was twenty-one, with five lecturers, three PhD students, four MA students, and nine BA students. The quality and quantity of data collected on the day exceeded expectations. We arrived at 8 a.m. and left shortly after 7 p.m., having collected over 100 interviews that spanned semi-structured and unstructured and ranged from passing chats to protracted conversations between people stuck next to each other in queues for three hours. We had autoethnographies of evaluations, extended participant observation of particular tables and areas, and interviews with participants before and after evaluation. Sometimes, those following an expert or the show's participants or its antique objects had opportunities to observe moments which were unexpectedly rich in perspectives on interactions. Lunch break offered opportunities to discuss emergent findings, identify gaps and gather further data in the afternoon. During the following weeks, we underwent QSR training in NVivo and began the process of coding and collating our data, which covered ninety-seven specific 'nodes' (NVivo coding indexes) relating to six broad themes – with more than enough data on each to produce an academic article. Findings from the research will be explored in later journal articles relating to specific themes.

Reflections on the pedagogically-useful implications of the project

The key finding of the project in relation to student/staff collaboration was that the data it produced eradicated any fears that research by undergraduates would be inferior. The process of standardisation of fieldnotes and oversight in the field led to excellent fieldnotes and interviews across the board. It is genuinely hard to differentiate between the fieldnotes

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of staff, postgraduates and undergraduates. If anything, staff fieldnotes indicated a degree of adherence to prior habits that was not necessarily advantageous in a group project. The group was self-selecting and this did mean we had enthusiastic participants who also tended to be stronger students – but the standard of data undergraduates produced demonstrated this to be an excellent method for gathering academically-robust data.

For the students, one of the main points raised was how well it worked as an introduction to the realities of field work. One undergraduate student (who has since gone on to do an MA at SOAS) commented:

“What I appreciated about the collaborative project was that we were such a big group of people. This made it a lot more fun and fed into the sharing of different ideas. It really helped to do actual research on the ground. Obviously we had all done smaller fieldwork projects before, but this was different, because it was 'official' and out of my comfort zone as I don't normally have anything to do with antiques or the people who collect them and don't like small talk that much. I remember feeling really awkward about approaching the first group of people for an interview, so this was great practice. When you sit in a lecture and are taught about participant observation it all makes sense but when you are 'out there' you have no idea what to actually do, or how to start. And I guess there is always the feeling of not being skilled enough, lacking the experience (particularly as an undergrad) or the knowledge about a topic. Is this the impostor syndrome everyone keeps talking about? With so many people collecting data it helped to take the pressure off.”

The camaraderie of shared endeavour and partnership, the widely-distributed responsibility and the meaningful work of gathering data to co-produce ‘real research’ was felt by the whole group to be a positive experience. The benefits of the lone-wolf/deep-end approach to learning ethnography are evident in how central the idea is within social anthropology – but it was self-evident to all teaching staff present on the day in Kent that CEE worked exceptionally well as a pedagogical tool. As you looked around Ightham Mote, you could see students not only learning about ethnography – you could see them *being* ethnographers. Having opportunity for oversight in a situation in which staff and students worked independently but alongside each other was as reassuring for the staff as it was for the students.

The main areas where there was evident scope for improvement were all organisational. In the weeks that followed the fieldwork, the distance between participants increased: as we consisted of second years, third years and MA students, the Ightham Mote project was, for some of our number, the last Goldsmiths-related activity before heading off to new lives. Organisational delays in NVivo training (which with hindsight we now see should have come sooner), having to overcome server-based issues concerning different levels of student/staff access and prolonged coding time all stalled the momentum of the project. We are still on track for producing three journal outputs from the project, but, in losing that momentum, analysis and publications have become more about a handful of us using the collaborative data rather than all of us producing outputs collaboratively as one group. The different schedules of staff, who have time to write in summer, and students, who get on with non-academic pursuits then, exacerbates this. As one participant noted, *“maybe it would be better to do this project in the 2nd year, with the option to keep working on it in 3rd year?”*

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Slightly more ambiguous was the success of the collaborative/partnership aspects of the research. As a 'collaborative' methodology, Collaborative Event Ethnography lends itself to a hierarchical structure. Between the tiers of lecturers, postgraduates and undergraduates, one could easily add other gradations of PhD.s/MA.s and the different years of undergraduate study. Here we aimed from the very beginning at something more collaborative, consensual and partnership-oriented: we chose the venue through consensus; we worked together to create viable research questions and shared and rotated tasks in the field. Data was inputted into a collective NVivo file available to all. But the partnership in writing was limited by the pragmatics mentioned in the previous paragraph. In order to smooth over these concerns about turning future research into outputs and embedding this approach into the curriculum, it seems inevitable that more top-down oversight will have to be applied – and such steering may well eradicate some of this consensus-based collaboration. We will need to be wary of this as we move forward:

“partnership is not easily or straightforwardly achieved and sustained. Developing a co-learning, co-inquiring, co-developing, co-designing and co-creating approach challenges traditional power relationships and involves a cultural change in how much of higher education is organised” (Healey et al., 2014, p. 21).

Following the review of this project, together with two more continuing student/staff collaborative projects, embedding this project into the curriculum between years two and three seems to be a pragmatic solution to some issues. Running workshops and fieldwork in the summer between the second and third year, with subsequent continuation into an assessed third-year module (while maintaining staff and postgrad participation) would deal with issues of disappearing students, whilst the submission deadline could be used to ensure timely submission of any pertinent contributions. Inevitably, with the embedding of it in the curriculum, oversight will grow and the space to improvise collaboratively through partnership will slightly diminish – we shall therefore need to be mindful that it does not radically change the nature of the power relationship.

Whilst these issues affected the ebbs and flows of the project, they were small caveats in an otherwise profoundly-beneficial experience. We found the CEE approach to be successful, in terms both of data-gathering for large scale, time-limited events and also of the pedagogical possibilities offered by a collaborative learning experience.

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