

Ed 308 Guide to Field Note Strategies for Ethnography in Education

Before launching any ethnographic project, be sure to ask these two questions:

- a) What is the research question you wish to answer?
- b) What kind of methodological design and fieldsite(s) is most appropriate for that research question?

While there are an infinite number of research questions and methodological approaches, this guide attempts to summarize several leading models for collecting field notes in educational ethnography.

1) Selective Verbatim

If you wish to analyze the content and meaning of people's words, especially within a certain category, then select specific verbal interactions and write down participants' exact words, often in dialogue format:

Example

RQ: What level of teacher-student questioning, based on Bloom's taxonomy, takes place in classroom X?

Field notes:

T: Who can tell me when the civil war began?

Boy3: It was like 1860 or something like that.

T: And what caused it, according to Northern sources?

Interpretation:

For more on Bloom's taxonomy, see

http://caribou.cc.trincoll.edu/depts_educ/Resources/Bloom.htm

2) Verbal Interaction

If you wish to analyze the directional flow and category of verbal interaction, rather than the actual content of the words, then select verbal interaction and develop a coding scheme appropriate to your research question.

Example

RQ: Does the quantity and quality of teacher-student interactions by gender differ in city versus suburban schools?

Field notes:

Codes: T=teacher-initiated; B or G = Boy or Girl Student-initiated

SQ=simple question; SR=simple reply; CQ=complex question, etc.

T SQ to all

Interpretation:

T SQ to B1
B1 SR to T
G2 CR to T and B1
T SQ to B2

3) At-Task Behavior

If you wish to systematically record the behavior of each student at regular time intervals, then develop a coding scheme and time frame appropriate to your question.

Example

RQ: Are students in city schools more likely to be academically engaged when using computers rather than students in suburban schools?

Field notes

Codes: A=at task, active; B=at task, passive; C=off task, talking off topic; D=distracted or daydreaming; H=requesting help from teacher

Time=8:55am

Interpretation:

S1 A
S2 A
S3 C
S4 H
S5 B

4) Classroom Traffic

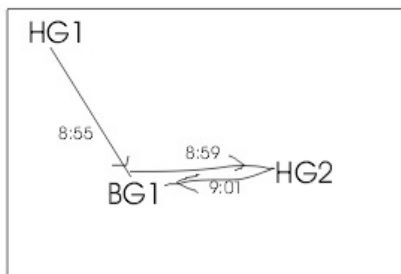
If you wish to systematically record the movement of selected students or teachers in a setting over time, then develop a mapping scheme appropriate to your question.

Example: Are students in a magnet school more likely to voluntarily interact with students of the same race, or of a different race?

Field Notes

Codes: H=Hispanic, B=Black, G=Girl

Interpretation



5) Thick Description

If you wish to draw a rich portrait of an educational process or setting, then write a thick description in narrative format, focusing on pre-selected themes if possible.

Strive to be insightful and creative in your methodological design. Think of the infinite possibilities of combining one or more field note strategies, and of combining them with non-ethnographic sources (such as official documents on the school, curriculum materials, interviews, quantitative data on school composition, budget, etc.)

*Modified from ASCD, *Another Set of Eyes: Trainer's Manual* (1987).