

G53DBC

Doing ethnography

(some slides adapted from Mark Rouncefield, Lancaster University)

Doing ethnography (1)

- Selling ethnography
 - “what are you here for? to make us redundant?”
 - individuals and organisations have ideas, expectations and fears about ethnography
 - some are sophisticated, others are exaggerated
 - having unrealistically high expectations
 - having unreasonable fears about the method as simply another form of ‘time and motion’ study
 - Both of these ideas need to be addressed

Doing ethnography (2)

- Beginning fieldwork
 - “You arrive, tape recorder in hand, with a grin rigidly planted on your face. You probably realise that you have no idea how your grin is being interpreted, so you stop and nervously attempt a relaxed pose. Then you realise you have no idea how that is being interpreted. Soon you work yourself into the paralysis of the psychiatrist in the strip joint - she knows she can’t react, but she knows she can’t not react. It is little wonder that sometimes people hide in a hotel room and read mysteries.” (Agar, 1980)

Doing ethnography (3)

- Initial phase of organisational ethnography
 - familiarising yourself with the organisation
 - characterised by the frantic collection of every piece of information that you are exposed to
 - make notes on everything that you see and hear, on what you’re told directly and on what you hear on the other side of the room
 - sketch plans of office spaces and desktops; glance at official documents and scribbled notes
 - tape record anything that you can
 - start anywhere you can

The role of the fieldworker

- Strategies range from full participation to incompetent
 - licensed to ask naive questions and, thus, explore much of what is tacit to the experienced member
- Dangers
 - don’t frighten the horses
 - going native

Focus of the study

- Choice between the innocent ethnography and informed ethnography
- How theoretically, strategically (etc.) informed should you be at the outset?
- One choice is progression from one to the other

What data should you collect? (1)

- Data collection is the least of the problems of ethnography
- Information is laying around in plain sight but no one has bothered to collect it up
- There is nothing special to look for, nothing to find that is hidden
- an illustrative list of the sorts of things that can be collected and recorded:

What data should you collect? (2)

- conversations; descriptions of activities
- diagrams of places; descriptions of places
- ‘sociograms’: who talks to whom and when
- jokes; interviews; job descriptions
- memos, notices, graffiti
- happenings; transcripts of meetings; forms
- ‘war stories’

Technical support for ethnography (1)

- Technologies must support analysis, not vice versa
- Video
 - Data can be analysed repeatedly off-site
 - Time-consuming data collection and analysis
 - Difficulty setting up and using equipment in some domains
 - Missing visual actions that are peripheral to the video field-of-view

Technological support for ethnography (2)

- Tape recording
 - less intrusive than video but data is less detailed
 - awareness of being recorded not a problem
 - useful to record long explanations, especially highly technical or domain-specific kinds
- Questions, paper, pen
- Programs to support analysis
 - e.g. Ethnograph™, NUDIST™, and Designer’s NotePad

Duration of the Study

- Effective ethnographers can grasp key aspects in a relatively short time
 - some aspects of the work may not be routine but exceptional
 - Knowing what problems occur, how frequently, and what their significance is, how they are dealt with and with what degree of ‘competence’ can provide very useful information
- There are no obvious completeness rules
 - Flattening of the learning curve
 - Knowing what you don’t know

Sensitising concepts

- Ecology of the workplace
- Egological Organization
- ‘Flow of work’ not ‘Workflow’
- Skilful work
- The social organisation of work

The ecology of the workplace (1)

- The way in which space must be organised in order that work can be effectively done within the constraints of the current system
- Example from ethnographic report
 - “the most commonly used materials, unsurprisingly are kept ‘to hand’. Significantly, and for the same reason, each cashier position is surrounded by notes stuck to walls, etc. which contain ‘at a glance’ information, most of which relates either to various codes for use with the system, or to information which customers commonly seek.”

The ecology of the workplace (2)

- Also the very fabric of work
- Reference and gesture
- Manipulation of objects
- Documents and paperwork
- Screens, projections and displays

The Egological Principle

- ‘What must I do next’ questions
- How work is organised by person doing it
- e.g. weaving interaction and technology

The Flow of Work

- Not Workflow
 - Remember: ethnography is behavioural not behaviourist
- Describing the work with all its contingencies
 - Orientation to Procedures
 - Skills and Expertise

Orientation to Procedures

- Procedures and their application are two very different things
- Example from Ethnographic Report
 - “I had a man in last week who wanted to open four accounts ... I just had time to get them open ... there was a queue right out the door there was no way I was going to get the Statics done ...”
 - Customers are unpredictable

Skills and Expertise

- Process outcomes are not entirely a function of the technology
- The limits of skill-training
 - e.g. Demeanour work- ‘keeping the customer satisfied’
- Skills are often unrecognised
 - local knowledge
 - obstructions to problem solving

Local Knowledge

- Bibles
- Example from ethnographic report
 - officers universally: “carry these mortgage bibles around ... all this could be on the screen. You could have your frauds, like your dodgy solicitors and accountants ... but we want it all organised so you’ll use it”

Obstructions to Problem Solving

- Skills compensate technology inadequacy
- Problems with technology may not be visible
 - e.g. reluctance to use ‘help’ facilities
- Experts
- The generational problem

Social Organisation of Work

- Awareness of what others are doing
- Example from Ethnographic Report
 - Cashier 1: “What do I do about this account? ... its got nil written on ... you can’t open an account without any money in it, can you?”
 - Cashier 2: “its Mr ... just put it to one side until he pays the £100 ... he’s got over £30,000 in his other account ... don’t actually open the other account, just hold it”
- Ethnography contrasts with Workflow Analysis

Summary

- Doing ethnography
- Data collection
- Technical support
- Sensitising concepts
 - Ecology of the workplace
 - Ecological Organization
 - ‘Flow of work’ not ‘Workflow’
 - Skilful work
 - The social organisation of work