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Ethnography in work integrated learning research

Bonnie Amelia Dean
University of Wollongong, bcord@uow.edu.au

Christopher S. Sykes
University of Wollongong, csykes@uow.edu.au

Jan Turbill
University of Wollongong, jturbill@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

This paper introduces and discusses ethnography as a methodological approach to investigate phenomena at the place of practice in WIL. The commensurability of ethnography for examining WIL 'in situ' is presented in order to delve deeper into WIL phenomena on placement through greater temporal and physical proximity. Part of the reason we haven't been able to fully understand student learning on placement, for example, is because of a lack of awareness and uptake of methodologies that employ direct observation in WIL spaces. Ethnography could open the door to investigating a range of research areas previously obscured or inaccessible by methodologies that keep the researcher at a distance. This paper offers practical implications for researchers in WIL by highlighting methods and future research areas conducive with an ethnographic approach.

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Bonnie Amelia Dean[1]
Christopher Sykes
Jan Turbill
University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia

This paper introduces and discusses ethnography as a methodological approach to investigate phenomena at the place of practice in WIL. The commensurability of ethnography for examining WIL 'in situ' is presented in order to delve deeper into WIL phenomena on placement through greater temporal and physical proximity. Part of the reason we haven't been able to fully understand student learning on placement, for example, is because of a lack of awareness and uptake of methodologies that employ direct observation in WIL spaces. Ethnography could open the door to investigating a range of research areas previously obscured or inaccessible by methodologies that keep the researcher at a distance. This paper offers practical implications for researchers in WIL by highlighting methods and future research areas conducive with an ethnographic approach.

Keywords: ethnography, methodology, methods, work integrated learning

Moving research to the place of practice

> See me, hear me, feel me
> Discovering the Other world
> My eyes opened to a paradigm of possibilities
> The Interpretivist is now becoming unfurled (Dean, 2018, p.5)

Methodologies for researching WIL have long relied on quantitative measures to determine, predict and plan for positive student outcomes (Coll & Chaman, 2000; Coll & Kalnins, 2009). Quantitative methodologies are underpinned by a positivist research paradigm that places the researcher at arms distance to the researched. The further away a researcher's assumptions, biases and attitudes, the greater perceived quality of the research.

Interpretive paradigms impose no such distance. Interpretive paradigms are orientations to research that are concerned with understanding the world through meaning (rather than measurement) that foreground context and the positions, decisions and understandings of the researcher (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2014). As Dean (2018) writes in the opening poem, interpretivist approaches accept inseparability of the research and researched as the researcher learns through relational, embodied exchanges to centralise human meaning-making (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2014). Through an interpretivist paradigm, similarly with other humanist epistemologies, we have the opportunity to remove our researcher distance and locate research to the place of practice.

As university WIL educators and researchers we are often at arms distance to practices on placement. We use strategies such as iterative reflective logs, student debriefing sessions, assessments and conversations with workplace supervisors, or research methods such as interviews or surveys, to gain insight into what's happening 'over there'. This distance impacts our choice of research topics as well as our pedagogical practices designing WIL curriculum. The WIL assessment literature, for example, is replete with concerns around designing assessments because of the complexities in how to treat, measure or account for learning on placement (Dean, Sykes, Agostinho & Clements, 2012; Ferns & Zegwaard, 2014; Hodges, Eames & Coll, 2014; Jackson, 2018). If we were to relocate our attention to the practice site, we could learn more about the issues at hand, such as student learning, in order to shed light how we effectively design WIL assessments.

In the WIL domain there is a lack of awareness and uptake of methodologies that enable rigorous, quality research through direct observation in WIL spaces. Observational methodologies, such as ethnography, could

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[1] Corresponding author: Bonnie Amelia Dean, bonnie_dean@uow.edu.au

offer an alternative approach for investigating a range of placement topics that enable the researcher to spend time in the field, relating with people, materials and places, to learn the meanings of a group, organisation or culture (Denzin, 1997). Moving research to the place of practice could open up a range of new topics, issues or ideas in WIL research pertaining to organisational culture, work practices, learning, pedagogical environments, stakeholder relationships or motivations, as well as investigations of specific phenomena such as technologies, materiality, events, processes and more that have been previously obscured or inaccessible.

This paper invites consideration for employing ethnography in WIL research. To do so, an overview of ethnography is introduced next before expanding on practical methods for data gathering during sustained time in the field and the implications of these methods for WIL researchers.

Ethnography

> These words are their stories
> But I'm inseparable to the formation
> Recorded through black and white letterings
> Keyboard strokes of emergent distillation (Dean, 2018, p.6)

In a broad sense, ethnography is a form of inquiry and writing that produces descriptions and experiential accounts of both researcher and participants (Denzin, 1997). Ethnography is a methodological sensibility that enables a close-up understanding of the social world by enduring extended periods of "hands-on time digging in the field" (Dawson, 1997, p.404) to reveal the 'mysteries' of often routine or ordinary ways of life (Ybema, Yanow & van Hulst, 2012). Centrally, ethnography is a process of sense-making of situated actors (Yanow, 2012) whereby the ethnographer's physical proximity is also the instrument for ethnographic knowing (Yanow, 2012). Given this entanglement in the construction of data, ethnographers remain reflexively aware of their geographic (physical and spatial) and demographic (access and limitations) characterises when writing their accounts (Yanow, Ybema & van Hulst, 2012).

The application of ethnographic research is diverse and widespread. Given that WIL is conducted across higher education and workplace spaces, the potential and scope of ethnography to bestride different domains is useful. Ethnography has been adopted to investigate educational phenomena such as language and literacy (Heath & Street, 2008), policy (Walford, 2001), teacher education (Frank & Uy, 2004), and evaluation (Fetterman, 1984). Ethnography has also been used to extensively to investigate workplace phenomena, for example, the effects of managerial decisions, the role of materiality, the silences in organisational discourses, the importance of social interactions and among others (Yanow, 2012).

To date, only several studies (e.g. Dean, Sykes & Turbill, 2012; Polin & Keene, 2010; Watson, 2008) have employed an ethnographic methodology in WIL or service learning research. Despite this limited uptake, ethnography can offer much to deepening our understanding of WIL placement phenomena. In order to employ ethnography in WIL spaces, a researcher must consider various ways of gathering data. Given the complexity of understanding and describing phenomena in-situ, multiple methods are often employed to triangulate data from various sources (Nicolini, 2009), which are now outlined in the adjoining section.

Methods

> I'm in the field, now what to do?
> The Other is by my side
> Write, observe, write, observe
> Surfing the discursive tide (Dean, 2018, p.5)

To uncover the hidden meanings on placement, multiple methods are required to combine contextual and temporal observations with the more perceptual and in-depth probing gathered from interviews (Dawson, 1997). Reflexivity plays an important role (Alvesson, 1996; Nicolini, 2013), both in participant-researcher discussions when co-producing meaning of particular practices and in researcher meaning-making when reflecting on data from multiple methods while producing thick descriptions of practice.

Six methods are highlighted below with brief considerations for WIL researchers. From these methods, opportunity arises for students and other WIL stakeholders to collaborate in the research process, in a co-

production of data generation, meaning-making and story-telling. This authentic, situated approach invites participants to become co-researchers in the construction and understanding of their own lived experiences, which adds value and depth to the new knowledges being uncovered.

Observation/participation

Observation/participation can help make explicit underlying patterns that occur in everyday life. What are considered robust empirical research material to some are "simply the trivia of everyday life to others" (Pader, 2006). Observation/participation forces researchers into direct contact with social and material phenomena for an extended period of time where, as a result, an appreciation for routines, norms and contexts is developed. For this reason, it has been described as "the fine art of hanging out - with a difference" (Pader, 2006, p.163). Given that outside of the context of practice, most people cannot talk about the specifics of what they do (Barley & Kunda, 2001; Suchman, 1987), as a research method in WIL, observation/participation has the potential to reveal more of what is *actually* going on than alternate methods such as interviews, surveys or focus groups that relay on self-reporting and reflection-on-action. Going straight to the source of practice, opens up the types of phenomena and research questions we can start to ask regarding learning, work, culture, communication, supervision and more that transpire on placement.

Reflexive participant interviews

Reflexive participant interviews are opportunities to ascertain deeper or different perspectives on issues, as well as allowing for processes of cross-checking fieldwork observations, theories or findings (Schaffer, 2006). In general, interviews uncover perceptions that can assist individuals to make sense of what they do and why they do it (Barley & Kunda, 2001). In addition to interview data, the interviewer may also consider paying attention to issues 'beyond tape-recorder knowledge' (Alvesson, 2011) such as the social, power and contextual relations that are implicated in the interview process.

In WIL research, reflexive interviews could be conducted before, during and/or after placements to question, elicit insight or prompt deeper thinking around students' or workplace supervisor's expectations, perceptions and experiences. The researcher may occasionally focus the interview based on a specific critical incident or activity recorded in field notes to gain more knowledge on the phenomena or to draw the participant's awareness to the phenomena. It may be useful here to use "tell me more" questions, for example, "When your supervisor showed you how to do X, I noticed that your response was X. Could you tell me more about that?"

Field notes

In addition to an ethnographer entering a social setting, developing relationships, participating in daily routines and observing all that goes on, they also create accumulating written records of exchanges and experiences (Emerson, 1995). Researchers may record what they watched and heard, and write about how that made them feel or connect it to other theoretical understandings. They may pay attention to practices that are new or routine, considered acceptable or unacceptable, and those that were interrupted, surprising or contradictory. Upon leaving each observation, a researcher may also take 'out-of-the-field notes' (Walford, 2009) to expand on details, re-write descriptions and/ or produce visual drawings or diagrams of spaces or material arrangements. Applied to a researcher on WIL placement, field notes are the primary source of data from which descriptions of practices, events, exchanges and materiality are recorded alongside partial reflections, thoughts, grappling's, notes-to-self, linkages to theories and more. These notes will form the bases of thick-descriptions, stories or case studies of the phenomena being investigated on placement.

Reflexive writing

As an important part of ethnography, reflexive writing provides opportunity to organise thoughts and develop new knowledge as well as reflect on personal development and emerging understandings (Denzin, 1997). This reflective process usually starts during field work, however space and time is needed specifically for reflexive writing out of the field. Given the inseparability of the researcher and the place of practice, it is important to reflect on one's body in the space, and how that may have affected actions and arrangements. Recording and reflecting on conversations with participants is also crucial to thinking about what role the researcher may have played or how the participant might be positioning the researcher at a point in time. On WIL placement, this may include thinking about the researcher's role with student participants in terms of how they have perceive

the researcher to be a colleague, supporter, coach, friend, co-worker, researcher, or university employee, for example, and what that might mean in this context.

Accessing, collecting and copying artefacts

Artefacts are intimately involved in shaping the way an activity unfolds (Nicolini, 2013). In ethnography, the analysis of texts, documents or artefacts in tandem with other data can foster understanding of the social phenomenon being studied (Silverman, 2001). An ethnographer may question: how and for whom the artefact is created; why it was created and when; whether it has evolved in some way; what has and hasn't been included (if a document); how is it shaping what is being performed; and, how the artefact is being used (Silverman, 2001). In WIL research, the types of artefacts that may be copied include subject materials, learning outcomes, assessments, lecture slides and handouts, marking material, reflective logs, placement program documents and workplace documents, products or artefacts such as emails, reports, to-do-lists, instructions and other correspondences (with permission). These may be copied or collected at a certain point in time, or over a period of time to observe changes in the way it is used, it looks or has evolved. For example, examining how a student may write and sign-off on emails initially and towards the end of a placement may reveal thoughts on identity and professionalism progression.

Photographs

Photographs can also be used as a complimentary source for producing data (Warren, 2009). Photographs can capture various dimensions of practice, materials, space and relationships. Photographs can serve as visual aids to re-frame situational experiences, sociomaterial configurations (things in the space), contextualise practices and trigger memories (Warren, 2009). Used in interviews, photo-interviewing (Warren, 2009) can be a starting point for the generation of conversation and co-interpretation. In WIL research, students or workplace employees may also volunteer to take photos to help convey what they saw and did on placement on the days the researcher is absent. Students may be invited to produce a visual storyboard of experiences and spaces through capturing images that are important, new or typical of their placement. Reflecting on these images, alone or together with the researcher, could highlight aspects of the placement site and practice visible to the learner but not accessible to an educator.

Conclusion

> A life-world of meaning is investigated
> Unpacked and laid bare
> Unearthing patterns, connections or themes
> And told, as an Interpretivist, with such care (Dean, 2018, p.5)

Although ethnography has a long history in related disciplines, it has been slow to adopt in WIL research. Ethnography has rich potential for unpacking the complexities of a range of placement practices that are not yet adequately understood or explained. WIL researchers are encouraged to look beyond engrained research methods to elicit data, to consider making their bodies, thoughts and reflections part of the research itself. Only by challenging our research conventions can we innovate our discipline and grow our knowledges in untapped WIL spaces. By moving our WIL research to the place of practice, we venture into alternative territory to learn new insights into, for example, student learning, supervision practices, discipline knowledge, informal learning, socio-cultural factors, assessment of learning, material arrangements and so much more.

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