

Educational Ethnography beyond Scholarly Ethnography. Transferring Meanings to Cyberspace

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Review Essay:

Honorio M. Velasco Maillo, F. Javier García Castaño & Ángel Díaz de Rada (Eds.) (2003). Lecturas de antropología para educadores. El ámbito de la antropología de la educación y de la etnografía escolar [Readings on Anthropology for Educating. The Field of Educational Anthropology and Scholar Ethnography]. Madrid, Spain: Trotta, 461 pages, ISBN 84-8164-640-7, 25 EUR

Key words:

education,
anthropology,
educational
anthropology,
scholarly
ethnography,
educational
ethnography,
cyberspace, social
education

Abstract: "Readings in the Anthropology of Education" includes several texts by well-known writers on ethnography. These were specifically selected for teachers who developed their teaching in various (socio-cultural) contexts in order to complete their teacher-training in anthropological approaches and techniques. Taking ethnographic research as its core, the work introduces the main contributions of anthropology and ethnography in the field of education in three parts. The first part is about the evolution of anthropology and ethnography in the educational field. The second part includes texts by authors who specialize in ethnography within a functionalist and structuralist philosophy. The third part presents applied educational studies based on these approaches.

In this essay I start from a global (re)vision of VELASCO, GARCÍA and DÍAZ's text. I look into the current state of methodological approaches and the ethnographic strategies described as well as into the application of them in the school in general and, particularly, in socio-cultural education. I present a reflection from cultural materialism about the structural and super-structural changes linked to recent technological innovations and how these innovations are shaping new ways of qualitative research and, in particular, ethnographies based on productions in cyberspace.

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1. Basic Contexts of Educational Anthropology and School Ethnography

VELASCO, GARCÍA and DÍAZ begin their work with a maxim that is difficult to refute: neither anthropology, nor its methodology of reference, ethnography, have been fully integrated to the preliminary education of "educators"—considering their professional profiles in a general sense. This situation has begun to be overcome only lately, as educators' practical roles become more open and universities try to include the "cultural event" as a frame for pedagogic intervention. Historically, educators have been far away from anthropology's theoretical and methodological stimuli. In fact, educational approximations to qualitative methodologies—where ethnography plays a main role—have traditionally come from fields closer to sociology, psychology and, even, philosophy, leaving apart anthropological approaches and methods. However, this distance between education and anthropology has not prevented the existence of links acting as communicators, as it is understood from the compilation presented by VELASCO, GARCÍA and DÍAZ, which includes the following texts:

First part: From anthropology to educational anthropology. From ethnography to the ethnography of scholarship.

- Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagos of Melanesian New Guinea, Bronislaw MALINOWSKI, 1922¹.
- The Ethnographer's Magic: Fieldwork in British Anthropology from TYLOR to MALINOWSKI, George W. STOCKING, Jr., 1983².
- Ethnography as a Methodology and Its Application to the Study of Schooling: A Review, Kathleen WILCOX, 1982³.
- On Ethnographic Intent, Harry F. WOLCOTT, 1985⁴.
- School Ethnography: A Multilevel Approach, John U. OGBU, 1981⁵.
- What is Ethnography? Dell HYMES, 1982⁶.

1 Originally published in B. MALINOWSKI (1922). *Argonauts of the Western Pacific; Native Enterprise and Adventure in Melanesian New Guinea*. London: Routledge.

2 Originally published in G.W. STOCKING, Jr. (Ed.) (1983). *Observers Observed. Essays on Ethnographic Fieldwork* (pp.70-120). Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.

3 Originally published in G. SPINDLER (Ed.) (1982). *Doing the Ethnography of Schooling. Educational Anthropology in Action* (pp.456-488). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

4 Originally published in *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 1985, XXI(3), 187-203.

5 Originally published in *Anthropology and Educational Quarterly*, 1981, XII(1), 3-29.

6 Originally published in P. GILMORE and A.A. GLATTHORN (Eds.) (1982). *Children in and out of School. Ethnography and Education* (pp.21-32). Washington D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistic.

Second part: Ethnographic cases.

- The Transmission of Culture, George D. SPINDLER, 1987⁷.
- The Teacher as an Enemy, Harry F. WOLCOTT, 1974⁸.
- Initiation into Bureaucracy, Elizabeth M. EDDY, 1975⁹.
- Jocks and Freaks: The Symbolic Structure of the Expression of Social Interaction among American Senior School Students, Hervé VARENNE, 1982¹⁰.

Third part: Education and school as socio-cultural processes.

- Classroom Discourse as Improvisation: Relationships between Academia Task Structure and Social Participation Structure in Lessons, Frederick ERICKSON, 1982¹¹.
- Summary and Conclusions, Robert B. EVERHART, 1983¹².
- The Powers and its Reproduction, Pierre BOURDIEU, 1989¹³.
- Cultural Production is Different from Cultural Reproduction is Different from Social Reproduction is Different from Reproduction, Paul WILLIS, 1981¹⁴. [1]

The book starts with a review of central anthropologists' approximations, from which mixed disciplines such as Educational Anthropology and School Ethnography have arisen. Following, a series of ethnographic cases are presented, where the school—or the educational act—occupies an outstanding place, not only as backbone of empirical practice, but also in a lateral way. Those cases enables interested educators to perceive how the projection of ethnographic approaches enables the gathering of data about aspects belonging to a culture and a relationship's dynamics between individuals that are often excluded from research experiences and educators' analysis. With that, the three editors fulfill their intention of introducing the holistic essence of qualitative methodologies within the framework of educational practices. To conclude, the compilers have decided to focus on certain anthropological theories based on the ethnographic analysis from events characteristic of the educational field and this, from a socio-cultural perspective, that is to say, as a framework for global intervention. [2]

7 Originally published in G.D. SPINDLER (Ed.) (1987). *Education and Cultural Process. Anthropological Approaches* (pp.303-334). Illinois: Waveland Press.

8 Originally published in G. SPINDLER (Ed.) (1974). *Educational and Cultural Process. Toward an Anthropology of Education* (pp.411-425). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

9 Originally published in E.M. EDDY (1975). *Becoming a Teacher. The Passage to Professional Status* (pp.25-56). New York: Teacher College Press.

10 Originally published in G. SPINDLER (Ed.) (1982). *Doing the Ethnography of Schooling. Educational Anthropology in Action* (pp.210-235). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

11 Originally published in L.Ch. WILKINSON (Ed.) (1982). *Communicating in the Classroom* (pp.153-181). New York: Academic Press.

12 Originally published in R.B. EVERHART (1983). *Reading, Writing and Resistance. Adolescence and Labor in a Junior High School* (pp.231-266). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

13 Originally published in P. BOURDIEU (1989). *La Noblesse d'Etat* (pp.373-427). Paris: Minuit.

14 Originally published in *Interchange*, 1981, 12(2-3), 48-67.

The main contribution of the volume consists of offering educators an analytic field endowed with tools for the interpretation of the (cultural) reality and methodological perspectives to research, starting from the resulting focus. Similarly, its construct can also awaken the reader's curiosity for the lateral aspects of education, those that escape from the study-plan's pedagogic orthodoxy towards the cultural phenomena located in the margins of the formal personal relationships that, in essence, endow the phenomenon of education with sense. The resulting framework is critical to educator's actions, fosters thoughts around the objectives of each proposal starting from its contextualization as part of relational and symbolic situations, and encourages paying attention to the meanings of actions, not just the simple consideration of behavioral results. [3]

It seems to be clear, by considering Bronislaw MALINOWSKI (1929), John W. M. WHITING (1941), Margaret MEAD (1949), Erik H. ERIKSON (1950) and, especially, George SPINDLER (1955), that educational anthropology is born as a prolongation of classic ethnography anthropology to the educational field. In fact, the beginning of that discipline did not take place inside the formal classroom environment or educational facility; rather, its genesis is based on classic ethnographic studies' projections of so called primitive cultures and social groups distant to the object of school ethnography. Anthropological studies' contributions to transition in "primitive" social groups suggest paths for analysis and data interpretation in western contexts, where education is configured around centers with strongly defined cultures and highly structured dynamics of initiation and social aggregation. It is within this apparently closed logic that educators benefit from ethnographic methods in order to discover in what ways the agents generate significances, routines and types of social behaviors in the core from cultures that are permanently assembled and disassembled along the life of the educational action. [4]

The authors of this compilation offer the reader brushstrokes of the best ethnography; they introduce a methodology and provide practical examples. They elaborate a taxonomy of conditions that serves as an initiator of action: what is the core, what characterizes ethnography as a discipline, what is its inductive character; what is its holistic point of view, (the "glue" that keeps together researchers and action itself, the data collection instrument and intervention dynamics); and, finally, what is the trans-cultural perspective? Under this line of reasoning educators can act with ease, penetrate inside their field of action and try to generate theories and theoretical constructs that elucidate implicit performances underlying schools' socio-cultural role. [5]

2. Diffuse Genus, Permeable Space: Transfer of Meanings?

According to a historical perspective, educational ethnographies belong to one of the following: (1) studies on educational processes outside from school (movement, culture and personality); (2) studies proper from educational ethnography—in its simplest meaning—that relate school to its context and its immediate social environment; (3) studies on school organization and the educational process; (4) studies on agents and relationships within a school's environment (micro-ethnographies); (5) studies on communicational systems within a classroom; and, (6) studies on school rituals or special events inside a school. These are the bases for analysis that VELASCO, GARCÍA and DÍAZ's compilation offers as means to approach ethnography at school. But, is this ethnography in education (in its most global and comprehensive meaning)? [6]

We can say, however, that current reality runs complex events and that it goes hand in hand with ethnography. Ethnography beholds a clear objective as it seeks to understand organizations—and educational institutions, as it is our case—as complex phenomena. In the case of school (and education), this complexity mostly comes from its "essential" (radical, substantial) permeability in relation to events in a both close and distant socio-cultural environment. The editors of this volume mention Anthony GIDDENS (1976) and Clifford GEERTZ (1973) in order to establish school ethnography's object in that context: the groups of relationships that are socio-culturally mediated, that both put into practice and constitute the individual subjects in a context designed to generate knowledge. We propose here an analysis that opens a debate around ethnography at school and that includes, on one hand, the open contexts from socialization in (non-Euclidean physical [MAYANS, 2002a]) virtual spaces and, on the other hand, the global social scenarios, as it is a person's life-space where education acts, in the current temporal context (LONGWORTH, 2005). [7]

Inside the current lattice of scenarios of social practice and construction of meanings in the educational field, there is, more than ever before, space for ethnography. However, an investigation's objective genus can be malleable and, therefore, adaptive. Basically, we speak about a transfer of meanings from "school" to "education" and, within this last one, about the flows of manifestations susceptible of generating knowledge in individuals based on agents, situations, exchanges and socio-cultural mediations that are extremely permeable within each other and where the school supposes a transcendent, but not central, phase. The school's social surroundings are characterized by a communicational exchange in virtual platforms, where negotiation of meanings is based on technologically mediated relational practices. The students and the teachers interaction is, therefore, based upon reciprocal exchange logics, that is, without hierarchical positions—what had been an obstacle for ethnographic practice, as correctly stated by the authors. Also, the initial and cultural transmission processes overcome an institution's speed of transformation and the national educational system's superstructure. In that context, ethnography plays a central role, helping us to look at the substances in their construction process. It is

exactly these social practices that are in constant construction and are currently setting a dialogic relationship framework with the established presumptions. [8]

On the other hand, educational ethnography can deal with the transfer of meanings between pedagogic practices in the physical environment and socio-educational processes in cyberspace. Those ethnographies are being currently developed by institutions that offer on-line education programs. These teacher-investigators, used to carrying out their duties under virtual conditions, possess suitable skills for the qualitative study of educational dynamics. [9]

When the genus from an investigation's object and the space of socio-cultural practice that surrounds an investigation are redefined, what happens with the method and the participant actors in the two circumstances aforementioned (lifelong education and pedagogic practice in cyberspace) can also initiate a debate. This occurs especially, when taking into consideration the bases of the anthropology of education present in the work that we are discussing here. [10]

3. Virtual Education and Ethnography in the Web

Somehow, virtual education expresses its full potential during a subject's vital cycle. Even when educational dynamics in cyberspace are focused on the learning aspect—that is to say, lifelong on-line education primarily seeks to educate individuals in practical abilities and instrumental knowledge, instead of serving as a main vehicle for cultural transmission—, their influence on the form of living and thinking of today's society is increasing. That position is, in a certain way, in part from a lifestyle where innovation lives in harmony with the Internet's processing potential (the material base for our information society) and takes place based on constant revisions and updates of previous knowledge in certain socioeconomic and cultural contexts—considering the works from Manuel CASTELLS and Pekka HIMANEN (2003). What the influences on that educational culture are continues to drive ethnographic studies and an expanded anthropology of education. [11]

From a classic perspective such as the one exposed in the reference work, the educational foundation subject to cultural changes caused by the Internet's technological eruption is susceptible to consideration by micro-ethnography, organizational ethnography or by the analysis of innovative educational strategies of rituals of appropriation. [12]

However, we outline another analytic level that takes place at one different to the one corresponding to face to face interaction—the practice of educational ethnography on the Web. Virtual ethnography fully includes classic ethnography's methodology in all of its assumptions since, after all, changes in the genus (not in the substance) of the study object do not necessarily end in essential alterations in the empirical practice. That is to say, ethnography, as an inductive, practiced, holistic, trans-cultural method that has the purpose of describing and analyzing the cultural substratum of the social constructions, remains unaffected when the investigation is applied to cyberspace. "Virtualized" practice is basically synthe-

sized in the works of Christine HINE (2000), Daniel MILLER and Don SLATER (2000) and David BELL (2001) and it is captured in a different way in by several authors' later texts such as Frank SCHAAP (2002), Joan MAYANS (2002b), Mia CONSALVO and Sussana PAASONEN (2002), Nicole CONSTABLE (2003), William J. MITCHELL (2003), Elizabeth A. BUCHANAN (2004) and Jeff RICE (2004), and equally possesses a wide background in the environment of anthropological cultural study. But, in opposition, it has not yet been assimilated in the practice of educational investigation from a qualitative paradigm standpoint. [13]

3.1 Method alteration?

Frederick ERIKSON, Robert E. EVERHART, Pierre BOURDIEU and Paul WILLIS offer, in the third part of the work of VELASCO, GARCÍA and DÍAZ, examples of complex ("dirty," as in WILLIS's own words) methodologies that bring the reader closer to what ethnography, in fact, is. The texts from these classic authors and their approaches to the use of central qualitative techniques, in any ethnography as observation, interviews and questionnaires (when these last are based on an open dialogic exchange) assist the theoretical-practical positioning of the specialists in socio-cultural environments linked to school and educational practices. [14]

The investigation techniques mentioned have in common the fact that they are configured around communication processes. What organizations are and what agents exchange, is molded in communicational processes. Consequently, data coming from ethnographies synthesizes ideas in circulation, transmitted behaviors and shared actions—be them in a partial way, or also, in contradiction—and that is exactly what is at stake on the Internet. Virtual spaces are meeting-points where individuals negotiate their meanings by means of discussion, debate, critique and reply. Although the assumption of roles, leadership, shared practices and cohesion dynamics in teams possess idiosyncratic features that are not distinguishing features from the (virtual) environment where they are developed, these aspects emerge inside and are based on processes of communicational interaction. [15]

In a medium that does not possess physical materiality (that is, virtual) and that is exposed to practice—its own existence depends on processes of permanent negotiation—the necessary conditions for the individuals that "inhabit" it generate basic cultural conditions with their interaction. It seems to be that, in this context, ethnography will achieve its frequent task of figuring out the cultural essence of different groups or "cyberspace communities," using Marc SMITH's and Peter KOLLOCK's (2003) terminology. [16]

The ethnographic method used in cyberspace is similar to the one applied to the conventional physical environment, yet with certain adaptations. As long as an object of study's genus varies in a space permeable to diverse cultural constructions (where, for example, mercantilist cultural industries and marketing strategies are distant—for the moment—from communities of programmers open to collaboration or from *bloggers* that practice a distributed knowledge), the

methodology becomes more diffuse, but still keeps unalterable essential principles as the investigator's participation in culture dynamics or the translation of *emic* messages generated in daily practice. [17]

In a given ethnography written and oral communication is reduced to written texts susceptible of being interpreted according to categories that follow norms of content analysis and that induce constructions denoting increasing complexity. Ethnography appeals to a description of the context to endow coded messages with a meaning. Trans-culturality is guaranteed by the transfer of relational links between members of different communities, which assures compared visions of apparently common situations. All of these are guaranteed by the traditional ethnographic method applied to cyberspace. [18]

Following this line of reasoning, permeability comes from adapting empirical practices to situations that require innovative answers. Interaction in a *chat* channel, for example, demands of the researcher instruments and positionings that diverge from the requirements for the analysis of the temporal journey or the influences in the surrounding environment (in reticular terms) of a certain *blog*. And in that sense, educational ethnography does not differ much from what happens in the relational processes in cyberspace's open medium. [19]

3.2 What happens with actors

Cyberspace is an environment that is non-material and subject to practice (MAYANS, 2002a, 2002b), then, manifestations of actors that "inhabit" it, foster cultural phenomena. The cultural constructions behind a subject's pedagogic practices in cyberspace are accessible though the study of the structures where action and its context take place. VELASCO, GARCÍA and DIAZ's book makes it clear that, for SPINDLER, that "structure" is the school and "context" is the socio-cultural environment; and that whole groups of elements are school ethnography's object of study. As we have seen, educational ethnography in cyberspace has the same object of study as ethnography, although its genus is under construction—mostly because virtual education covers frameworks that overcome school ethnography's limits. [20]

Even when not considering non-formal didactic experiences—the most common in cyberspace as, for example, "practice communities" (WENGER, 2001) that promote team-learning being based on the principle of socialization of knowledge or on shared *Wiki* spaces that generate knowledge in a well-defined socio-technological and infrastructural framework—within the ruled virtual teachings, investigators can confront their ethnographic "immersion" in very heterogeneous situations, such as in professionalizing continuing education, training of basic competitions, higher graduate and post-graduate education, training of communicational skills, and so forth. Reviewing diverse educational experiences' configurations, we see that the diffuse aspect of the genus of the object of study is in harmony with the lack of definition characterizing subjects responsible for cultural practices. [21]

As long as ethnographers attempt to perform an analysis of a cultural-educational reality in cyberspace, they meet elements that are common to any empiric investigation with physical actors, but whose definition is not completely evident. Somehow, this—the need to clarify an actor's roles—will be one of the first tasks that they will need to address in their investigation. Investigators will need to consider what is the role that actors play in the development of the web's educational culture, together with their position on basic socio-cultural patterns as participation, the construction of meanings and the pedagogic approach used. And all of it, in a virtual environment. [22]

4. Conclusions

In this essay I review VELASCO, GARCÍA and DÍAZ's book entitled, "Readings in the Anthropology of Education," in the framework of an historical contrast, showing the evolution that school ethnography and educational anthropology have undergone from the moment of their creation until today. The contrast with the current socio-educational moment was contextualized within the ethnographic practice of educational experiences in cyberspace. [23]

In that context, I proposed some reflections on the nature of school ethnography in current times, defined according to two vectors that constitute a tendency: education along the life course and on-line educational processes. Both issues encourage us to speak about educational ethnography as a journey longer than the one that had been proposed by classic authors of school ethnography, as compiled in the work of VELASCO, GARCÍA and DÍAZ. [24]

Lastly, I focused the discussion on three central aspects of the ethnographic process:

- the genus of the object of investigation, which we describe as diffuse, according to the new configuration of educational practices in the information-society;
- the alteration of the ethnographic method in the virtual environment (by definition, subject to practice and non-material);
- the role of social actors implied in educational initiatives and their contribution to cultural phenomena as objects of consideration. [25]

I characterized the situation by stating that educational ethnography faces a transitional process and proposed that, although several ethnographic investigations that base themselves on a consideration of cyberspace as an environment for social practice have already been undertaken, no critical mass has yet been generated in the educational field. This will be necessary in order to advance a redefinition of the aspects that I have put forth in this essay. My own work, for example, produces potential action-paths, fruit of my teaching experience in the virtual field. [26]

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Citation

Domínguez Figaredo, Daniel (2006). Educational Ethnography beyond Scholarly Ethnography. Transferring Meanings to Cyberspace. Review Essay: Honorio M. Velasco Maillo, F. Javier García Castaño & Ángel Díaz de Rada (Eds.) (2003). *Lecturas de antropología para educadores. El ámbito de la antropología de la educación y de la etnografía escolar* [Readings on Anthropology for Educating. The Field of Educational Anthropology and Scholar Ethnography] [26 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 7(2), Art. 2, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs060223>.