WHO'S LOOKING AT WHO, LOOKING AT WHO?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers the values and challenges of a highly embedded participant ethnographic methodology that has evolved over the last four years in the course of two formal ethnographic studies in higher education. The method has been developed by a practitioner-researcher in tandem with the learning design of a new programme. As such, the roots of the method lie very much within the paradigms of heuristics and action research but lend themselves equally well to more formal, extended ethnographic work. The nature of this method raises several interesting, messy and difficult issues that are further explored. The first is the nature of practitioner research and the purpose of participant ethnography in this context. What does it mean for the teacher to concurrently and contemporaneously inhabit the role of researcher? This leads neatly into an exploration of the attendant ethical considerations. Issues of power and positionality must be tackled, and the ability of the researcher to engage in fully reflexive practice and research is key to unpacking this. Who or what is being observed, and from what perspective? Whose experience is really being interrogated – that of the teacher or the student? Finally, as this method has evolved from, and shares much in common with, action research, consideration will be given to the nexus of action research, observation and formal ethnography – both in terms of the participation and contributions of the teacher-researcher to the process and the students, who in effect become auto-action researchers, investigating themselves as learners and their experiences with their peers.

Keywords: Participant ethnography; practitioner research; ethnography; partnership curricula; positionality; reflexivity

INTRODUCTION

Much ethnography has been done in education, but the value is often seen in making the research as objective as possible (Hammersley, 2006). Often non-participant observation is used, where the researcher is not a part of the phenomenon being observed. Emerging methodologies of virtual ethnography (Dooney & Kim, 2017), where the observer is remotely placed, are increasingly used, such as netnography (Howard, 2018) or documentary ethnography. At the other end of the scale, where the observer is valued as a part of the phenomenon under study, the ethnography is often limited to observation of the self in an autoethnographic fashion (Ellis, 2004; Struthers, 2014). These approaches all offer much in terms of minimising the problematic nature of ethnography, increasing validity and ethical acceptability (Humphreys & Watson, 2009; Lubet, 2018), but maybe they also fail to capitalise on some of the strengths and complexities of the ethnographic method. Perhaps the richest observations of all come from those within the phenomenon under study – from the inside looking out, rather than from the outside looking in.

MY CONTEXT

I am a Principal Teaching Fellow at a research-intensive STEMM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine) institution, where I have designed and deliver an ancillary programme of modules to mixed discipline undergraduate students from across the whole university. Loosely themed around global issues and creating impact and positive change in the world, the Change Makers' modules (Hauke, 2017; Imperial College, 2020) are designed to provide the students with interdisciplinary and extra-disciplinary modes of working, outside of their core educational experience. The modules, which are designed to facilitate novel co-production (Fennell, Gobbett, Henry, Shepherd, & Hauke, 2019) with each cohort, require the students to engage with their learning in ways which may, initially at least, seem alien and counterintuitive.

The students must propose and determine the limits of the content they will research and bring to the classroom, while following working processes that break down many of the pedagogical conventions with which they are familiar. They write their own research questions, design their own projects and assessments and write their own mark schemes. They must work collaboratively, so that each student is contributing something different from, but also complementary to the work of other students. In effect, they are designing a distributed curriculum, where different thematic elements of the 'narrative whole' of their topic or problem are contributed by different students. They must also design and implement a mechanism that ensures that not only will they contribute their area of depth and expertise to the class, but that they will also fully engage with the breadth of work created by the rest of the class. Additionally, they must critically evaluate their own engagement with their learning – we encourage the students not only to exploit their strengths and prior experiences but also to challenge themselves to work in new ways and to take risks.

From a delivery perspective, these modules require very different skills from the teacher than a traditional lecture. Much of the planning and design involves structuring workflow and finding engaging ways to encourage the students to work in a particularly open, collaborative and reflective way. There is a limit to the amount of preparation that can be focused on content, as this is largely defined and contributed by the students. However, there is a large amount of continuous 'preparation' that is involved in responding to the students' ideas and interests; negotiating with students in response to their suggestions and proposals; and mediating and 'shepherding' the progress of the whole cohort, such that every student feels that they have value within the group, and no one gets left behind or strikes out too far in a different direction. It is a particular challenge to encourage divergent working, while maintaining enough coherence that the students feel that they are participating in an organised and defined module with their peers, rather than completing independent work entirely of their own design.

In order to facilitate these classes and support the students individually and as a group, the teacher needs to really engage with the students, their approach to their work, their ideas and abilities. In the learning design, this is managed by utilising observational practice in a variety of ways. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, the teacher watches what the students are actually doing. The teacher looks, listens and reflects on what is happening. This can be quite affronting to some students, who prefer to work privately, or to perfect their work before 'showing' it to the teacher or to other students. At the start of the module, the teacher explains the reasons why observation is so important, and what it might look and feel like in the classroom. The students are also encouraged to observe the teacher and each other. There is an observation policy that details the rationale for this practice and gives students examples of how they might encounter this during the module. The policy also encourages students to observe and learn from each other – detailing the difference between learning from someone and adopting good practices that you see and admire, from copying or plagiarising the work of another individual. This is something that particularly concerns the students – the idea of 'copying' is so enmeshed with bad practice that differentiating 'learning' is critical.

Other types of observation include remote observation of students working – such as in online spaces or via emails and other out-of-classroom communicative activity, and observation of directed expository or reflective activities. A lot of learning activities are intended to help students to expose their own assumptions about learning or about producing 'good' work, and once these are visible, to challenge them. The students are asked to design the workflow or process that they will use to achieve their goal within the module, detailing research, goal setting, iterative components, feedback loops and even things like time away from the project, social breaks or well-being activities. Once these are documented, they too are available for 'observation'. As a class, we produce written, diagrammatised or visual representations of many moments during the module, and these are all able to assist with documentary observation and provide opportunities to triangulate different types of observation to build richer, more complex understandings of each other.

This type and degree of observation is integral to the pedagogical approach taken in these modules. But it also affords an opportunity to reflect on the modules beyond considering the individual students and their work together. The degree of observation has been critical in the ongoing development and refining of these modules since the inception of this programme in 2012.

THE NATURE OF ENQUIRY

Research may be described as 'systematic enquiry, the outcomes of which are made available to others' (Menter, Elliot, Hulme, Lewin, & Lowden, 2011, p. 3). You could argue rigidly about what should and should not be considered research, but in reality there is an axis of enquiry that could be considered with a degree of fluidity and flexibility.

At one end of the axis, as you might expect, is formal academic research. This work is produced by an academic researcher – whose role and expertise is focused on the conduct of that research. This work will usually be peer reviewed, published and shared with the wider academic community.

At the other end of the axis is reflexive practice (Hertz, 1997). This work is conducted by a practitioner, whose main role and focus of expertise is on their specific professional practice (for us, education), although they might have varying levels of expertise and experience in formal research as well. This individual reflects on their own practice and then acts on that reflection to modify and improve their practice. This reflection and subsequent evolution of practice might inform individual, local or wider practice and may be shared using less formal publication.

In between these two might lie various types of professional enquiry and practice – including methodological processes such as action research.

While enquiry is the common thread holding these various practices in tension with one another, we might argue that there is increasing systematicity as we move from reflexive practice to academic research. Certainly, the need to establish and share the systematic design of the enquiry is increasingly necessary as we move along the axis – I don't think it is necessarily fair to argue that there is a lack of systematic thinking at the practice end, but rather there is an increasing need to establish and demonstrate validity and reliability of any findings as we move toward research, as these are valued and prioritised differently at this end of the axis.

The sharing of outcomes is differently valued between the practice and research ends of the axis. Generalisation of findings and sharing via established academic outlets, such as peer-reviewed journals, is more critical to the project of research than to reflexive practice. At the practice end, the enquiry may inform individual or local practice, or be shared via less traditional outlets, such as seminars and local conferences, internal communications, blogs and perhaps social media. This is not a dichotomous relationship, but rather a perhaps traditionalist view of these distinct but wholly related practices. I would argue that these distinctions are over-represented in this characterisation, but are nevertheless helpful in our critical exploration of these relationships.

I do not think that these distinctions are necessarily borne out in practice – in the actual enquiry conducted by the practitioner or the researcher. But rather they are present in the cultural, intellectual and dialogic approach to the enquiry.

The Practitioner-researcher

To further muddy the waters of our enquiry, we have to situate the work of practitioner-researchers. Practitioner research in education is a 'systematic enquiry in an educational setting carried out by someone working in that setting, the outcomes of which are shared with other practitioners' (Menter et al., 2011, p. 3). This in itself might span the whole axis of enquiry – from reflexive practice to academic research. However, academic research conducted by a practitioner is a little different to that conducted by an outsider to the setting – something that we will consider a little more in the context of ethnography shortly.

Schön can help us understand the nature of professional practice, and why an insider approach to researching that practice might be beneficial: 'Situations of practice are not problems to be solved but problematic situations characterised by uncertainty, disorder and indeterminacy' (1983, p. 16). Practice is akin to a problematic situation – it is messy and imperfect and temporally dynamic. Pre-defined, researched and published 'knowledge' might not meet the needs of the ever-evolving context of practice. Navigating the field of practice requires the integration of experiential expertise with that of a more traditional knowledge-driven view of expertise, alongside an openness to the uniqueness of the situation in time, place and person. Therefore, successfully researching aspects of this practice might require this same practitioner-based, situated expertise. While in some research settings it is preferable to try to maintain objectivity and externality, the unique and ever shifting landscape of practice might benefit from some 'experiential luggage' (Rudie, 1994, p. 28).

Schön (1983) further reflects on the performative nature of practice – and the dangers of bringing a rationalised, technical approach to understanding it. Practice involves artistry, creativity, reflexivity and the ability to work through the unknown and perhaps unknowable. Practice is both a conscious and unconscious process – some aspects are easily articulated and some are not. They are borne out of experience and instinct, from being within the field of practice.

Practitioner research can help practitioners make sense of the complexity of their own real-world practice – for themselves and others. Additionally, we can learn from the practice-based research of others to help us to interrogate our own practice, raise inspiring or thought-provoking questions about our own experiences and lead us to undertake some form of enquiry ourselves.

Practitioner Research in Education

Practitioner research in education is variably defined and conducted due to the vast range of professional contexts of the educator. So what of the practice of education? Where does the process start and end – what is open for practitioner research to interrogate and potentially change? Much research into the nature of

practitioner research in education has been conducted in the context of education in schools and as a tool for teacher training or professional development (Ellis & Loughland, 2016). Stenhouse (1975) identified challenges to the conduct of practitioner research as occurring at the individual, internal or external levels, and to reflect personal, interpersonal, professional, political or cultural constraints.

Considering first those individual and personal constraints, it is important to recognise that not every teacher, lecturer or educator will feel comfortable with the self-critical aspects of interrogating their own practice. It might be too challenging on a personal and psychological level to question the day-to-day, minute-to-minute practice of education, stirring defensive and potentially destructive reactions. With a practice built around confidence and authority, this spotlight of reflection might erode the very foundations of that practice. The skills and abilities needed to undertake practitioner research are 'not naturally present in all teachers' (Enthoven & de Bruijn, 2010, p. 298) and the idea of research might provoke anxiety in teachers who do not feel confidence about their ability to conduct research (Burns, 1999).

There will also be implications for time, workload and scheduling. Practitioner research, although aligned and occurring contemporaneously with practice, might require much additional time for preparation, reading, recording, analysis and writing. Not every practitioner is the master of their own time, many are heavily constrained by packed timetables, administrative burdens and a lack of institutional recognition of the time devoted to practitioner research.

Where teaching is not an independent and individual endeavour, interpersonal factors come into play. Practitioner-researcher of team-teaching or of modules or courses delivered by multiple educators requires the co-operation and, ideally, collaboration of multiple members of staff. These different team members may be more or less comfortable with the idea of practitioner research and may be differentially impacted by the personal factors discussed. And then even within a team of equally committed and confident researchers, there are the additional challenges of working collaboratively (Aubusson, Brady, & Dinham, 2005; Capobianco, Lincoln, Canuel-Browne, & Trimarchi, 2006).

Within the wider teaching community – at perhaps a departmental or faculty level, there may be additional challenges from educators who are not themselves involved in practitioner research. Some may take an ideological opposition to the nature of this work, and practitioner-researchers may face considerable ill feeling (Aubusson et al., 2005; Burns, 1999; White, 2011).

Institutional practices that regulate learning design, module structure, assessment practices and teaching innovation might constrain the ability of the practitioner-researcher to act on any insights gained from their research – they may not be permitted to make changes to their own practice.

Finally, externally, some might question the validity of such embedded research – questioning the subjective nature of the work, the ethics of such an undertaking or the transferability of findings from within one setting to a wider audience. While there can be no questioning the subjective nature of embedded practitioner research, we must recognise that even the most objective of research

projects requires the act of observation – which is inherently problematic (Noë, 2015). Even with automated, technically enhanced forms of observation, a subjectivity-prone human has been involved in the design, calibration, operation or interpretation of that 'infallible' observation. So as Eisner argues,

> …recognizing and accepting the inevitable transaction between self and world seem to me more realistic and more useful. This recognition would underscore the constructed, tentative, and framework-dependent character of perception and knowledge. It would contribute to a more pluralistic and tentative conception of knowledge, one more dynamic and less dogmatic, one with a human face. (1993, p. 55)

To take this a step further, philosophically speaking, 'neither subjectivity nor objectivity has an exclusive stranglehold on truth' (Phillips, 1993, p. 61).

I'm often questioned on the nature of my teaching – in having such a responsive and student-lead design, 'what if it all goes astray – what if the students take things in the wrong direction, or derail your curriculum completely?' The same argument might be made about practitioner research – 'what if the researcher becomes distracted by the richness of the experience, or by an insignificant or irrelevant happening?' As Dey says, 'there is a difference between an open mind and an empty head' (1993, p. 63). It is possible to be an informed, prepared professional – whether in the role of teaching or researching – and still be open to seeing what is happening in front of you and responding in a useful and professional manner.

The Designer-practitioner-researcher

But what about for those practitioners who as well as being practitioner-researchers, are also designer-practitioner-researchers (Fig. 1)? In one sense, this simply affords greater opportunities to implement the findings of any research within the specific practice under study. But also, it offers something more than this. More than the sum of the parts: for the design, practice and research to really work together in more advanced ways, for the design to support the practice and the research, and for the practice and research to inform the design. Rather than working as a formalised 'cycle', the three might operate alongside each other rather more intimately.

HEURISTICS, ACTION RESEARCH AND ETHNOGRAPHY

I was appointed to my role to develop a new strand of cross-faculty undergraduate learning at my institution. In my first few weeks, I had to deliver a pilot module that had already been set up, and then before the end of term present (and get through committee), three new module designs to begin the following term. I approached this challenge using backwards design principles – thinking about where I wanted the students to end up, how I wanted them to get there and then how to go about setting that up as a learning experience (Hansen, 2011; Tyler, 1949).
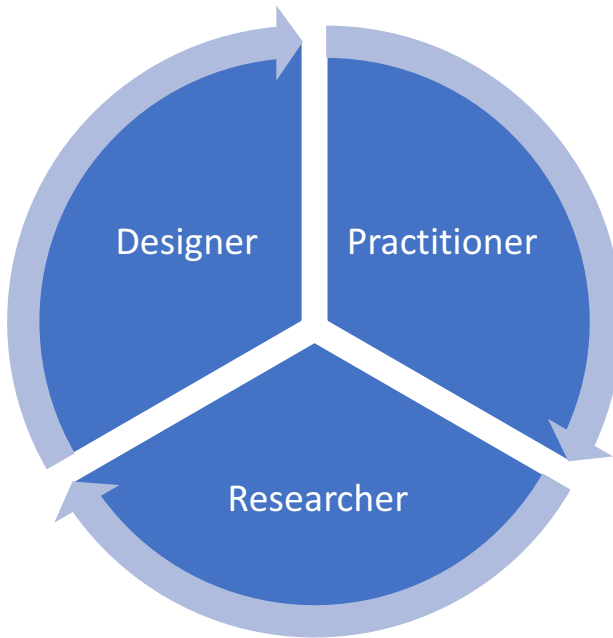
Fig. 1.   Designer-practitioner-researcher.

But I didn't go and sit in a room with a pen and paper and do my 'design' in isolation. It came to life as I was working with those students in that imperfect pilot module. I imagined, dreamed and lived the emerging design(s) as I was teaching:

> …through exploratory open-ended inquiry, self-directed search, and immersion in active experience, one is able to get inside the question, become one with it, and thus achieve an understanding of it. (Moustakis, 1990, p. 15)

Putting myself into the experience, living the twists and turns with the students and taking an 'inside-out' perspective (Salk, 1983) allowed me to fine-tune my design to precisely what I wanted to achieve for and with my students. This heuristic approach meant that I was continually open to what might work or not work in practice, but also to creating mechanisms within the design for me to be able to judge what was or was not working: both for the purposes of further heuristic work and to allow me to fine-tune the practice with each cohort of students. No two classes are ever the same, and I wanted a learning design that would allow me to monitor how each cohort were engaging with their learning in my modules, so that I could be responsive in my practice and maximise their experience to best suit them as individuals and as a specific cohort.

So there were two levels of enquiry built in to the design from the start – an ongoing heuristic process and a step-wise process of action research (Carr &

Kemmis, 1986; Lewin, 1946; Schön, 1983) that I could use to formalise modifications to the design within the regulatory framework of my institution.

An additional benefit of the heuristic approach was that it challenged me to always want to know what the students experienced of my design. How did they feel, what did they understand the purpose to be of particular activities, were they able to take what they had learned with me and use it to enhance other aspects of their study? Some of these questions could be asked and answered in a fairly simple way – and so I did just that. I asked and some students answered – and I realised that those students who had been asked, and had reflected and answered, then behaved differently. They became more involved in their own learning, they benefited from that reflection and they applied those benefits in subsequent tasks and sessions. It was clear that there would be a benefit to building these questions, reflections and moments to make meaning out of our activities together into the actual design for all students. Not every student would necessarily make the same leaps, reflect as deeply or be able to apply their insights straight away – but overall it would change the nature of the learning experiences for the better.

And it changed the landscape of my practice. I no longer needed to find opportunities to ask questions – I was constantly being bombarded in the classroom by explicit statements and reflections from the students about their learning and about their experiences. I could now 'take the temperature' of our engagement – see what was and what was not happening. This was a huge step forward for the responsive nature of the delivery. But it also opened up a further avenue of research to me: ethnography.

From a Problematic Past to a Problematic Future

Historically, ethnography was about observation of the other. From interrogating the accounts of returning missionaries (Van Maanen, 2011) to first-hand veranda observation – where ethnographers observed 'native' life from the comfort of a purpose-built house on the periphery of the community (Kuper, 1977) – to fully embedded observation from within distant communities (Watson, 2008), ethnography has been the Western attempt to understand the culturally and socially 'other'. Steeped in issues of hegemony ethnography has now moved away from this difficult origin and is often used to study local cultures, as in the work of the Chicago School (Deegan, 2001). And most recently, there has been a move to use the method to study the culture in which we, ourselves as researchers, are embedded (Ellis, 2004; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Hauke, 2016) – either as autoethnography, where the experience of the researcher themselves is under scrutiny, or as highly embedded participant ethnography where the experience of the researcher and those around them are interrogated. While it is possible to study local culture ethnographically using more traditional methods, it is the hyper-local that interests me here, the studying of a culture in which one plays a critical and power-imbued role.

These more intricately interwoven forms of ethnography have been described as constituting either evocative (Ellis, 1999) or analytic ethnography (Anderson, 2006). Both include and make visible the researcher's self. Evocative ethnography

works with the emotional and vulnerable person of the researcher, both spiritually and bodily, to generate intimate detail that speaks to moral, ethical and political issues and involves the reader in the analytic project. Analytic ethnography, although still working with the presence of the researcher in the narrative, commits to a theoretical level of analysis above and beyond that associated with evocative ethnography. This dichotomy has been challenged as somewhat artificial – with many seeing these approaches as complementary (Sochaka, Guyotte, & Walther, 2016; Williams & Jauhari bin Zaini, 2016).

What is clear though is that bringing together a truly reflexive research orientation (Hertz, 1997) with the modern practice of ethnography does bring together two distinct types of problematic. There is the presence of the researcher within the research narrative – this adds to the complexity of the observation and analysis. And there is the act of observing the experience of another. What can you ever really know about their experience without the integration of the researcher's interpretation? So here, we see that one problematic helps to resolve the other. By acknowledging the input and presence of the researcher, we start to make visible the presence and nature of their interpretation. While this doesn't take away from the 'messy' nature of the work, it does allow for a critical reading and understanding of the research. In conducting highly embedded participant ethnography as practitioner research, we add in a third level of problematic, in the 'messy' nature of practice.

Highly Embedded Participant Ethnography in the Higher Education Classroom

In 2016, I completed my first piece of ethnographic research interrogating my own teaching (Hauke, 2016). This highly embedded participant ethnography (Jerolmack & Khan, 2018) was true practitioner research. I observed myself and my students for the duration of one module and wrote a short ethnography focussing on the potential for transformational learning (Mezirow, 2000) within this learning design. This work was fraught with issues of positionality and ethics. Conducting the research covertly so as not to distort the behaviour of the students was made possible thanks to our explicit observation policy. I could be present with the students in the position of teacher, collect 'teaching data' as observations of learning and teaching practice and only interrogate this as a researcher following post-hoc consent from the students following the conclusion of the learning and teaching process. The intricate design and practice makes this possible. There are no visible differences in my teaching notes when I know I am observing for the dual purposes of practice and research than when I am simply teaching because the teaching requires just as much reflection, reflexivity and consideration as the research.

I additionally had to consider whether I would be able to 'observe' anything of value. Would I see what was actually happening, or what I wanted or expected to see (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007)? There is a constant tension in observational work between warding off the seduction of familiarity (Becker, 1971; Delamont & Atkinson, 2004; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) and harnessing the insights that familiarity can bring (Mills, 1959).

This initial work was invaluable in developing my own experience as an ethnographer and in establishing the ways in which design, practice and research could really work alongside each other. It also gave me the confidence to include more of my own autoethnographic observations in my work, adding transparency and insights into my position, observations and analysis. Ethnography is after all, a written work, and being present in the authorship of that writing can prove very powerful.

Thinking further about reliability and validity, my subsequent ethnographic work has taken care to include the most sceptical voices – of both the learning and the research (Lubet, 2018), and to think explicitly about the nature of what is being produced. Is it an account of truth? Is it a true record of the experience of others? Or, rather, is it an account of my observations that by a process of analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 2009; Saldaña, 2012) and phronesis (Frank, 2012) are telling a compelling story designed to illustrate, provoke, stimulate, inspire and question that very truth? Phronesis, the use of the researchers' experience and instinct for storytelling, points toward the constructed nature of the ethnography – that it is created out of observations, perceptions and interpretations.

My latest work (Hauke, 2021) has also raised questions for me about the nature of observation, and the role of students as research participants. I have had further opportunity to consider my dual identities as practitioner and researcher but have also come to think of my students as having dual identities as students (participants in a specific module at a specific institution) and as learners (reflective and reflexive practitioners in their own right). My learning design pushes the students to explore their identities and practice as learners within the safety and containment of their roles as students, and I am beginning to wonder if there is a way to recognise that within my own practitioner research.

The Nature of Observation

Observation is often characterised as being a linear process (Fig. 2). There are two roles – that of the researcher and the research participant. The power to observe is held by the researcher, and they have uni-directional gaze toward the participant.

A development of this would be to acknowledge some level of reflexivity (Etherington, 2004) in the observation (Fig. 3). Here we see the researcher reflecting on their own role and presence, and on the observation.

As yet though, we don't see any active contribution of the research participant to the observation. This is very much a hidden, voyeuristic type of observation as

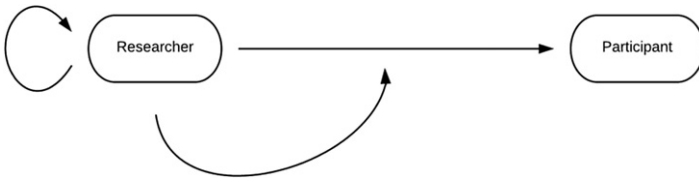*Fig. 2.* Simplistic View of Observation.

Fig. 3.   Observation Including Researcher Reflexivity.

the research participant cannot be aware of the observation according to this model. And yet, most observation is not covert.

So what role does the observed play in the observation? Well Rose (1990) suggests that, via a process he calls reversal, as much can be gained from observing the observation of the observer by the observed than from the actual, intended observation. That is to say, noticing the reaction of the research participant to the presence of the observer can produce real insights (Fig. 4).

Now we see the researcher and participant having personal reflexivity and observation flowing in both directions between the researcher and the participant. The researcher can now reflect on both their own observation and the reverse observation of the participant.

Complicating these ideas a little further, what if the researcher is a researcher practitioner? What if they are also observing themselves in practice? This might then appear as in Fig. 5.

Now considering this in the context of researcher practitioner ethnographic work in education, we see the reflexive researcher, reflexive teacher and reflexive student. The practitioner (teacher) is under observation (autoethnographic), as is the student (ethnographic). In this scenario, the student is unaware of the presence of the researcher, and the focus of the reversal is on the teacher participant.
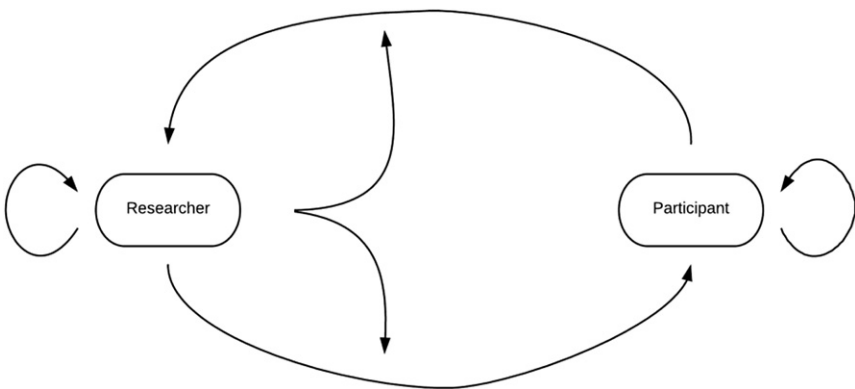

Fig. 4.   View of the Observational Reaction with Reflexivity and Reversal.
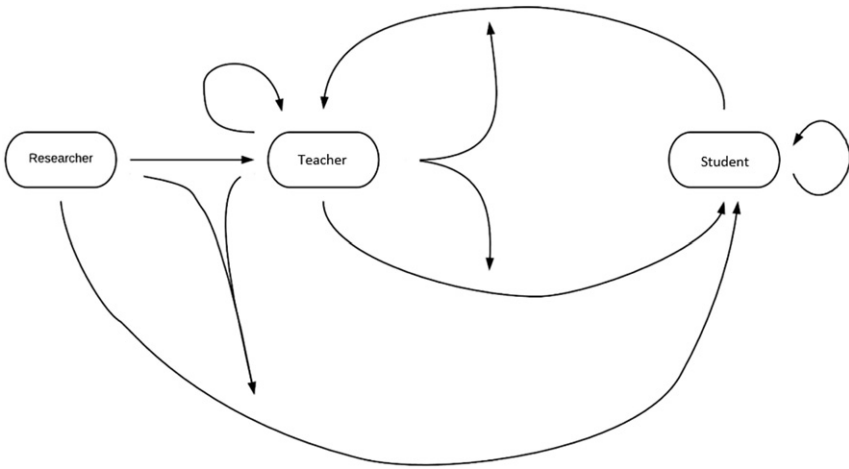
Fig. 5. View of Observational Interactions with Reflexivity, Reversal and the Presence of the Researcher as Participant in the Practice under Observation.

However, if we take this yet one further step to reconceptualise the identity of the student as both student and learner, we see that there might also be some auto-observation (whether or not this constitutes autoethnography depends on the awareness of the approach) on the part of the learner/student diptych (Fig. 6).

This brings us to an important point – the availability of these observational arcs in the classroom. How are those various lines of observation revealed to the observer(s) – in this case the researcher, the teacher, the student and the learner?
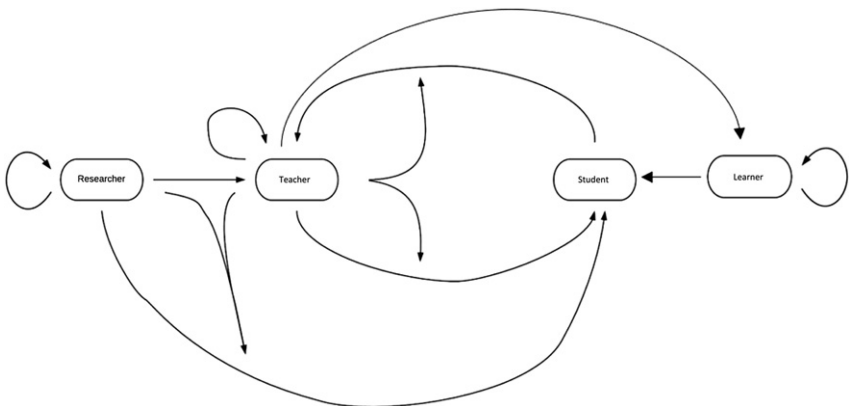

Fig. 6. View of Observational Interactions with Reflexivity, Reversal and the Presence of Both the Researcher as Practitioner (Teacher) in the Practice under Observation as Well as the Student and Learner Interaction.

As I have already discussed, the specific learning design under scrutiny in my own context has been created to make the learning experience of the students as explicit as possible. For the students and learners there are learning benefits, for the teacher there are teaching benefits and for the researcher there are observational benefits. I always consider my classroom to be like a hall of mirrors at a fairground. Each moment that takes place in the classroom – each question asked and answered, each activity navigated, each learning reflection completed – places a mirror somewhere in the classroom. And I, as the teacher and the researcher, can see a reflection from that mirror that I would not otherwise be able to see from my position at the metaphorical front of the class. And as these mirrors accumulate, these reflections become many. They also become more complex to interpret as the reflections interact – perhaps bouncing off multiple mirrors, perhaps with refractive and misleading distortions, perhaps interacting with reflections from other students along their path to my own observation. But it is the interaction of the design with the practice that makes this research possible.

Just Who Is the Researcher?

If we refer back to Fig. 6, there is one more interesting note that we might make. Highly embedded participant ethnography, in this particular context, constitutes the practitioner-researcher making observations and writing an ethnography based upon those observations. And the data for this research are those very observations. But what if the observations are not being made by the researcher practitioner? What if the research participants (students and learners) themselves are producing the observations? What if the researcher is actually interrogating the observations of the participants rather than their own observations? If the reflexive self-observation of the practitioner constitutes an autoethnographic contribution to the eventual ethnography, how are those participant-generated observations being honoured and credited?

As the teaching directs the students to observe and reflect on their own practice, and it is these observations that are integrated into the ethnographic work – should these data be considered 'found data' and integrated without further consideration of the source, or should the student participants be recognised as autoethnographers in their own right?

I would argue that the student has not generated those observations via a research lens – they have not sought to reflect on their own learning practice of their own volition – they have been directed to do so as a part of their learning. So it might be a stretch to argue that this constitutes an ethnographic practice in its own right. Additionally, the student-learners are not contributing to the analysis or writing of the ethnography.

However, are we not setting the students up to conduct their own action research – a learning-oriented action research to further their own learning practice? And are they not sharing their outputs with their colleagues and learning community (class)? So would this not constitute research using our earlier definition of a 'systematic enquiry, the outcomes of which are made available to others' (Menter et al., 2011, p. 3)?

And whatever we think of the observational contributions of the students in this particular context, perhaps this points us to a deeper level of research that could be conducted. It would be a relatively small step to take the students' directed self-reflections and observations, and frame this as an autoethnographic practice with the students. The students could record their own observations and conduct their own analysis and writing or output (it needn't be written). These multiple auto-ethnographic views of the same shared experience could then be collated, curated and shaped into a further integrated ethnography. A multi-perspective 360 degree (auto)ethnography could be produced of one of these learning experiences, capturing and recognising all involved as practitioner-researchers. This has been designed, received ethical approval and is being conducted as the next step in this exploration of the highly embedded participant ethnography, taking practitioner research to a yet more complex and messy realm.

CONCLUSION

In considering the nature of highly embedded participant ethnography, we have begun by unpacking the notion of the practitioner-researcher and what this might mean for the planning, conduct and dissemination of the work. We have seen that there might be many challenges to this type of research (the confidence and ability of practitioner to conduct research, collegiate and institutional support, the autonomy to act on research findings), but there are also factors that make this practice a rich and rewarding process (a practice that incorporates design and delivery, an ongoing cycle of action research and reflective practice).

We have considered that by simultaneously evolving a learning design, delivery strategy and research methodology, it is possible to create an environment that is readily observable and supports the voices of all participants – including those sceptical of their experiences. We have briefly considered the ethical implications of this work and explored one way to manage the ethical difficulty of working and researching in this way – by differentiating 'teaching' and 'research' data, and making post-hoc use of 'teaching data' to facilitate research, consenting students once their learning is complete, but before the 'work' of research in this context commences.

And finally we have thought about the nature of observation – in terms of what is being observed. In this highly embedded participant ethnography, is the teacher observing the students' experiences, or is the teacher merely interrogating the students' own reflections on their experience? In which case, should the student be considered more than a research participant? I would argue that in most cases, the students' reflections constitute a form of 'found data', and that if the student is unaware of the ethnographic nature of the research when producing these reflections, then they are research participants rather than researchers in their own right. That's not to say that they are not auto-action researchers of their own learning, or that they cannot be engaged in contributing actively to ethnographic work when set up as a 360 degree piece of research, with multiple autoethnographic accounts being actively and mindfully produced.

This methodology is still very much evolving, alongside the design and delivery of the teaching itself, but it does produce some rich and provocative material. As I have mentioned, I do not believe that these accounts represent any kind of truth or ultimate knowledge about the experience of the students. However, they are carefully and painstakingly considered and have immense value provoking reflection and raising questions about many different issues that are as pertinent in vastly different contexts and practices as they are in my own. As such, it really does feel as though the insights generated do come from within the experience looking out, rather than from without, looking in.

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