Development education in higher education: Ethnographic research as a development education methodology

Roland Tormey and **Marie Kiely** explore the capacity to use the process of learning to carry out ethnographic research as a vehicle for enabling students to learn, in an active way, the core thinking skills of development education, in higher education.

Much of the attention in development education is often focussed on the content knowledge of the discipline (human rights, famine, Latin America etc.). Development education, like related forms of education (such as education for sustainable development or intercultural education), is also centrally concerned with the development in learners of certain thinking skills (Development Education Commission 1999; Irish Aid 2003). These include, amongst others, a capacity for recognising what Bhikhu Parekh (1986) has referred to as "the inherent plurality in the world" and a capacity for "systems thinking". While development education is also concerned with the use of participatory educational processes to develop these skills, it is not a discipline which, to use Freire's terms, seeks to "lecture students into sleepy silence" (Shor, 1993). This process dimension may, to some degree, limit development education's penetration into formal education where more didactic methods are common, particularly in higher education where the teaching methods have traditionally consisted precisely of "lecturing students into sleepy silence". This undoubtedly poses challenges to the often-stated aim of development educators to make further inroads into higher education (UNECE, 2005; Irish Aid, 2003).

One higher education area in which students are often active learners is in learning the craft of social research. Social research methods courses are found in sociology, anthropology, psychology, political studies and social studies undergraduate programmes and in postgraduate programmes in these disciplines as well as in education, and other cognate disciplines. Following on from research by Mansur and Gidron (2003), this paper explores the capacity to use the process of learning to carry out one form of social research, ethnographic research, as a vehicle for enabling students to learn, in an active way, the core thinking skills of development education, in higher education.

Ethnography and development education thinking skills

Key development education thinking skills

Development education is centrally concerned with the development of thinking skills, many of which are the same as the thinking skills that are developed through the study of social science disciplines. According to Berger social research disciplines like sociology are centrally concerned with what they call "seeing the strange in the familiar" (Berger, 1975). In essence, this means recognising that everyday patterns of living are not "the way things are done", but are, instead simply, "the way we do things" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). To take as a practical if mundane example, students in a lecture hall will sit down, take out a pen and notebook and sit in relative silence often taking notes based on what a lecturer is saying. If, however, the same lecturer were to give the same lecture outside the campus bar, it is unlikely that the same group of students would respond in the same fashion. Why this is, Berger suggests, needs to be questioned. The wit and wisdom of the lecturer (or lack thereof) is the same on both occasions. Its usefulness to the students in terms of passing exams is the same on both occasions. The strangeness that is at the heart of these different patterns of action needs to be recognised in order for the reasons for this pattern of action to be understood.

Berger notes that this "strangeness in the familiar" (what the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh referred to as "the newness that was in every stale thing/ when we looked on it as children") should be recognised as an element in many everyday actions. Why is it that people agree to 'meet for coffee' and then drink tea? Why is it that people will happily eat fried potatoes (chips) using their hands from a paper bag or rolled up newspaper, but would never consider eating mashed potatoes in the same fashion? Why it is that students are more likely than banking executives to wear jeans? These are all questions that we might want to address when we start to recognise the "strange in the familiar". Ultimately this means that we cease to see our own culture as being the 'correct' or normal culture but instead begin to recognise that our culture is one of many with its own set of meaning-systems that make sense of its habitual practices. Ultimately this should also mean developing a recognition that, while the practices of other cultures may be unfamiliar, they will have their own meaning-systems to support them and are, ultimately, no 'weirder' than our own. Mansur and Gidron (2003) refer to this idea as "the principle of openness".

As such "seeing the strange in the familiar" is central to an understanding that underpins many adjectival educations (see References and Bibliography):

"The inspiring principle of multi-cultural education then is to sensitise the child to the inherent plurality of the world – the plurality of systems, beliefs, ways of life, cultures, modes of analysing familiar experiences, ways of looking at historical events and so on" (Parekh, 1986).

Berger also notes that a key concern of disciplines like sociology is to see "the general in the particular" (1975). This means we need to recognise that our everyday practices do not stand by themselves but take place within social, political and environmental systems of which they are a part. Students wear jeans, for example, because it is part of a cultural expectation in the society within which they live. Those jeans are also part of a broader set of social, environmental and economic relationships linking the wearer to producers of cotton living in, say, Egypt, as well as to the health and environmental implications of the use of pesticides and bleaches in the growing and processing of the cotton. Meeting someone for coffee is also a cultural phenomenon. Furthermore, it also links the coffee drinkers through trade systems and the operation of multinational companies to poor and exploited coffee growers in Rwanda and Ethiopia. Recognising these broader social patterns and links within our everyday action enables us to take responsibility for the distant consequences of our actions. As Pierre Bourdieu has noted, sometimes it is only by recognising the way in which social forces have shaped our actions that we can actually become free to make our own choices. Sociological analysis is, he claims:

"...one of the most powerful instruments of self-knowledge as a social being, which is to say a unique being... [It] offers some of the most efficacious means of attaining the freedom from social determinisms which is possible only through knowledge of those very determinisms" (Bourdieu, 1998).

It should be clear from this that some of the thinking skills of development education are built on a social scientific perspective. It should hardly be surprising then that these skills could be developed through the practice of social research.

Ethnography
Ethnography is a qualitative approach to social research that involves a process of living in and critically making sense of a culture as a set of meanings that exist as a complex and interrelated whole. It is often seen as being in opposition to a more 'positivist' approach to social research in which the researcher stands outside the phenomenon being researched and

imposes his/her own constructs on it such as might be the case. For example, in survey research where the researcher decides in advance the questions to be asked and where the range of responses which are allowable and in which the people researched are generally seen as research 'subjects' rather than 'participants'. As such, ethnography is seen as involving a sharing of power with the people being researched, since it involves the development of findings in communication with them. It is often, therefore, described as belonging to what might be called a 'humanist' research tradition and draws on the same underlying philosophy as does much development education work. Although there is no single agreed definition of ethnography, a definition like that of Atkinson and Hammersley (1998, p.110) would be broadly acceptable to many. They describe ethnography as having the following features:

- a strong emphasis on exploring the nature of particular social phenomena, rather than setting out to test hypotheses about them
- a tendency to work primarily with 'unstructured' data, that is, data that have not been coded at the point of data collection in terms of a closed set of analytic categories
- investigation of a small number of cases, perhaps just one case, in detail
- analysis of data that involves explicit interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions, the product of which mainly takes the form of verbal descriptions and explanations, with quantification and statistical analysis playing a subordinate role at most.

Although having roots in anthropological studies of 'foreign' and 'exotic' cultures, the growth in interest in qualitative research methods in disciplines like sociology, political science and, to a certain extent, psychology, from the 1960s onwards saw a growing use of ethnographic-like approaches to research in these disciplines. Qualitative research methods using an ethnographic approach are now a routine component of undergraduate programmes in a range of social scientific and social studies disciplines.

Mansur and Gidron (2003) have argued, based on research conducted with their students in Israel that ethnography is an ideal educational tool to enable learners to come to grips with key thinking skills. They argue that the unstructured and power-sharing nature of ethnography enables:

> "...an educational process of learning. Students describe aspects of their own cultural life and those of others, and at the same time, they ask questions such as: how is culture transmitted across generations and how does it change over time; what happens when different cultures

come into contact with each other; how it influences people's thoughts, feelings, beliefs and acts; how does it give meaning to shared activities, and so forth. In this way it creates the possibility of openness to others". Following on from the work of Mansur and Gidron then, in our research we sought to utilise ethnography as a learning opportunity to enable students in higher education to develop key development education thinking skills through the practice of carrying out and talking about ethnographic research.

Research methodology
Our research project was based on evaluating the extent to which key development education skills were learned by a group of twenty five higher education students through a guided process of engaging in the craft of ethnographic research. The students in question were student teachers who were undertaking a module in either intercultural or development education as part of their teacher education programme. Research was not a required or a key part of their programme of study, nor was the work graded. The students were self-selecting, in that they (a) had chosen to undertake the optional course in either development or intercultural education, and (b) they took the opportunity to be part of the research group when given the choice. This suggests that the participants were receptive to the learning aims of the project and clearly means that this research cannot be taken as representative of higher education students in general. That, however, was not its purpose. Its aim was instead to explore the possibilities for using ethnography as a learning tool for development education thinking skills. All of those that chose to be interviewed for the study were female, something that is perhaps unsurprising in a context in which six-sevenths of the overall student cohort were female.

Those who chose to be part of the research group were given two short training sessions in ethnographic research and were then required to complete two participant observation sessions in locations and times of their choosing. The only requirement around these sessions was that they would take place in a given context in order to maximise the capacity for students to meaningfully discuss their findings with each other. The contexts chosen for the first set of observations were 'eating environments' (restaurant, dinner with family, chip shop). The first set of observations was followed by a facilitated, whole-group discussion within which the students presented the findings of their observations, with particular reference to identifying the "strange in the familiar" and the "general in the particular". The students then chose a second context in which to carry out observations. On this occasion they chose "environments of socialisation". This was again followed by a facilitated discussion and then by group presentations by the participating students.

In order to evaluate the students' learning through the process thirteen of the group were interviewed after the first of the two initial training sessions and again after their final presentations. The interviews were carried out by a researcher who was not a lecturer and who would play no part in the grading of the students. The researcher was also a former student on the course, which further aided the building of a relationship with the students. The presentations made by the students were also analysed in order to assess the extent to which their participation in the process contributed to their learning of the identified key thinking skills.

Findings
The students who participated in the study identified a number of contexts in which the "strange in the familiar" became apparent to them. Seating patterns in restaurants (people sitting near the aisle or the wall along trestle tables, but not in the middle of the table), different behaviours of those sitting alone as compared to those sitting with others, and variations in the times when people felt able to use their hands for eating were all identified by the students as aspects that surprised them when they paid attention to the "strange in the familiar". This contributed to a greater awareness of the diverse 'ways of living' that are accommodated under the broad heading of 'Irish culture'. As one of the respondents noted:

> *"You notice things a lot more, especially with the ethnographies because you're taking more notice of what people are doing, and as well, you're beginning to realise habits and more than one person could have the same kind of habit of doing something, of eating or just buying a paper or something like that. And as well, you realise that its not just Irish music and dancing and singing that are part of Irish culture. It's the way people talk and eat and drink and sit and stuff like that, y'know, that are different to the way other cultures would do it".*

The observations of contexts of socialising as well as contexts of eating also contributed to this broadening awareness of Irish culture, and to an awareness of the extent to which culture is not fixed in a particular time, or with a particular set of habits, music, dance or language, but is instead constantly in a process of change, adaptation and becoming. Another respondent, when talking about her new awareness of what Irish culture is today, said:

> *"I suppose diverse; there's many different kinds of areas in it and it's not just Irish people, it's Irish culture involves so much. Irish culture is*

people who are in Ireland, not necessarily Irish people; people who are in Ireland and what happens, y' know. Like someone who's doing salsa dancing could be considered part of Irish culture because it's going on in Ireland and it's what Irish people are doing and what people in Ireland are doing".

Combined with this richer understanding of the diversity within Irish culture was an increased sense of openness to other cultures. For some of the students this was most evident in relation to the diversity they saw within Irish culture in the form of new migrants, but others did articulate a sense in which other cultures no longer seemed so 'exotic' once they began to recognise the 'strange' within Irish culture itself.

While many of the students showed significant learning in relation to the "strangeness in the familiar", the outcome in relation to recognising "the general in the particular" was more limited. The social patterns they tended to recognise most readily were gender-based, something which was perhaps linked to the fact that all of the interviewees were female. This can be seen from the following quotes from two different interviewees:

"… the way I look at Irish culture has changed and the factors that influence our culture and the way we act. I have noticed more factors, as in I think gender, there is a little bit of inequality in relation to, not that its inequality, but there's a difference between the way men and women act".

"Yeah, like gender, I never really saw it to be not male dominated but how males have, like we didn't really notice differences of treatment. Like someone was saying yesterday like in the canteen the guys got more food and stuff. And in the bars and stuff I noticed guys were much more relaxed and girls; they don't let go as much. So I think it's just my ideas haven't really changed. I'm just more aware of individual differences, stuff like gender and age".

Other than in relation to gender issues, however, the ethnography related work did not give rise to any clear understanding of the broader social systems within which human actions take place, despite the fact that this topic was the subject of considerable attention in the second discussion session with the students. Other than in relation to gender they continued to focus on the local contexts of behaviour rather than identifying, for example, distant consequences of local action.

Conclusion

The integration of development education into higher education is an often-stated aim for development educators. Although the content of development education may be similar to the interests of many in higher education, the tendency to use didactic, lecturing methods in higher education tends to limit the engagement of development education in that milieu. In this project, we sought to explore the potential of using ethnography as a participatory and active-learning teaching tool and learning opportunity for the development of thinking skills that are at the core of development education. In doing so we were hoping to build on Mansur and Gidron's conception of a "principle of openness" (which we tended to call "seeing the strange in the familiar") and also work to develop some understanding of systems thinking (which we tend to call "seeing the general in the particular").

Although the use of ethnography worked well in aiding students in developing a more open and fluid conception of their own culture, and, as such contributed to their becoming more open to other cultures, the results were far less clear cut in relation to their development of systems thinking. Although their ethnographies gave many of them a far greater awareness of gender issues, it did not play any significant role in developing an awareness of other systemic issues.

This study was a small and limited one, based on a self-selected sample of interested people, but also based on much less input on and experience of doing ethnographic observations than would be the case in many undergraduate programmes. As such, this study highlights some of the possibilities of the use of ethnography as a development education teaching tool, and leaves open the suggestion that extended facilitated work could go further in developing key development education thinking skills.

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The term **adjectival education** is used by The Development Education Commission to describe a related set of social and political educations, which often have an adjective before the word 'education'; examples include human rights education, development education, peace education, social justice education

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