

Collaborative ethnography as a model for public engagement and knowledge exchange

The project brief

This project explored collaborative ethnographic research as a vehicle for public engagement and knowledge transfer through dialogue and action research between researchers, community research participants and policy makers. It focused on the fields of language, children's learning and early years. Ideas and findings were shared with the wider PGR / researcher community through three mini seminars and one major seminar as well as a web based learning resource.

Key impacts

Through our seminar series, the group co-constructed a deeper understanding of collaborative ethnography – how to define it, how it works in practice and an appreciation of the multiple ways in which collaboration can be realised in ethnographic research.

The mini research projects produced some very high quality research in their own right – with potential for further research and publication and benefits to the community participants.

Outcomes observed

For participants of the mini seminars and major seminar:

- Further networking after the seminars
- Increased awareness of collaborative ethnographic methods and deeper knowledge
- Participants used the content of the mini seminars in their research or their research proposals

The legacy

- Funding secured for the ESRC social science festival project as a follow up to this project - students from the collaborative ethnography project were invited on a series of visits to Rotherham to see collaborative ethnography in action.
- Online materials have been created.
- A taught a DDP session on collaborative ethnography, which drew on the findings and resources from this project.

Enterprise

Our project was founded on an understanding of enterprise being about responding to problems and issues relevant to communities with research which is relevant and useful. Rooted in our commitment to collaborative ethnography was the belief that researchers cannot begin to offer research that resonates with communities without taking participants' views of the world as a starting point for knowledge production.

As an example of this perspective, one mini research project worked with three mothers in Rotherham to understand how their children learn. The research privileged the knowledge of members of society who are usually pathologised (young female parents living on benefits). The participants set the agenda, research question and chose how to allocate funds. The research sought to maintain openness about what knowledge could be produced during the project.

Innovation

Collaborative ethnography and public engagement was an innovative response to the call for applications to the Research Enterprise Innovation Fund because it offered professional development on a subject which was not previously available to students at the university (collaborative ethnography) and which placed collaboration and co production at its core.

Key examples of innovation are:

- The network which was established was inter-disciplinary and specifically focussed on the nature of collaboration in ethnographic research
- The network embraced a diversity of understandings about how collaboration could happen in practice, and was deeply reflective about the implications and impact of this
- The scope of the discussions was radical in its consideration of how research should be carried out and the purpose of research
- Building on the concept of co produced knowledge, online learning materials have been developed based on the discussions and understandings co created by the seminar attendees - in this way the learning materials act as both evidence of the learning in the project and a starting point for further collaborative learning

Quotes and personal experience

"I think there is a great deal of potential to build on the expertise, and enthusiasm for this research approach that the project captured, for example through further opportunities for students to develop their ideas, and a longer standing network."

To find out more contact

Abigail Hackett (a.c.hackett@sheffield.ac.uk) & Kate Pahl (k.pahl@sheffield.ac.uk)
Faculty of Social Sciences