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TYSTYSGRIF UWCHRADDEDIG ADDYSGU MEWN ADDYSG UWCH

POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Cylch Dysgu 2 | Teaching Cycle 2

The Seven Principles of Good Practice for Actively Learning Research Methods

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Chapter Four

Practising Level 2 Human Geography:
'The Seven Principles of Good Practice' for actively learning the research method of Participant Observation

4.1 Introduction
Reportedly, one of the major attractions for students about studying for a geography degree at University are the opportunities for undergraduates to undertake fieldwork in overseas locations and to spend a large proportion of their third year undertaking a piece of supervised, yet self-defined and self-directed piece of research. Central to both of these activities is a thorough grounding in research methods. Importantly, within human geography, research led teaching is not only teaching guided by the research interests of members of staff. Research led teaching can also be teaching that explores with students how different styles of research can lead them to generate different kinds of research materials to answer to geographical questions. Theoretical and conceptual developments within human geography have meant that over the last 10 - 20 years the research methods utilised in human geography have become more diverse. Drawing on the practice of research in other related disciplines, such as Anthropology and English, research methods adopted by human geographers have diverged greatly from the universal models and calculations of statistical probability that dominated the 1960s and 1970s.

The challenge of creating a stimulating classroom learning environment to appropriately equip students with an understanding of one of these new research methodologies – participant observation - forms the basis of this second learning cycle. Firstly, I outline the key features of the module in which the lecture on participant observation takes place. Secondly, I explore the limitations of the existing participant observation lecture. In section three I apply Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) Seven Principles of Good Practice to help design an active learning and

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1 My evidence to support this statement has been accumulated from numerous discussions with prospective IGES students on open days between 2003 to date. It is also supported by institutional feedback solicited from students following our annual field trip to New York.
teaching exercise that used individual and group learning methods to encourage students to practise the research method of participant observation. I conclude this report by reflecting on feedback provided by students on the role that different components of the lecture played in their learning. I also set out future changes that might be implemented to develop the exercise further.

4.2 Key features of (GG27310) Practising Human Geography

Practising Human Geography is a core second year module for human geographers and an option module for joint honours and major minor students. There are normally 60 - 70 students taking the module which is currently timetabled to fall in semester two of the academic year. I inherited the role of module coordinator for Practising Human Geography in 2004 and also the responsibility for the delivery of 5 out of 10, 2 hour lectures on the module. Between 2004 and 2006 the 5 remaining lectures on the module have been taught by a number of different members of staff. To make the most of staff areas of research specialism, staff contribute lectures on research methods they are most familiar with. Because I have utilised a range of research methods to conduct research and feel comfortable teaching about a range of research methods I have, over the years, had to deliver lectures on a variety of different research methods within the module.

Since my appointment as module coordinator I have made a number of subtle changes to the existing module. In line with developments in the utilisation of new research methods, the lecture course has been focussed. The course now delivers research training in four key research methods: interviewing and focus groups, participant observation, the analysis of historical sources and the analysis of contemporary texts. The aim of the module is to familiarise students with the differences between qualitative techniques in human geography at an epistemological, analytical and practical level. Students attend either one or two, two hour lectures on each of the four research methods and then select and undertake two pre designed research projects out of the four on offer. These two projects comprise 45% each of the overall module grade. Undertaking the projects introduces students to the practicalities of using specific methodologies and provides students with an opportunity to analyse and communicate geographical material. The remaining 10% of the module mark is awarded for student participation in two group workshops each worth 5% of the
overall module grade. The workshops are designed to enable the students to share experiences about research practice through the creation of group posters. The exercise is designed to address particular facets of the research process and encourage students to reflect upon their experiences of undertaking research. The aim of the workshops is that students will hopefully learn more about research practice through sharing information with their peers via the group poster exercise. Appendix 3 contains copies of student support material for the module including a copy of the module outline, a sample copy of the research methods report guidelines, the participant observation research project guidelines, the assessment/feedback sheet and the workshop poster exercise guidelines and assessment sheet.

4.3 Identifying the limitations of the existing participant observation lecture

Prior to this teaching cycle I had delivered the lecture on participant observation only once and had not been happy with how the lecture had gone. On the one occasion I had given the lecture I had adopted a formal lecture style that focused on the delivery of methodological (theory plus method) content rather than involving students in learning exercises that actively engaged them with the research method. As a consequence of this students had not been given the opportunity to make sense of what they had learned about the method or gain feedback about their understanding and use of the research technique. I had not adopted this approach because I did not see the value of lecture based exercises; it was instead because I had been unsure how best to engage the students in appropriate exercises to practise the research method in a classroom setting. As Cloke et al. (2004:170) point out "although participant observation is now a standard approach in the discipline's methodological literature only a tiny proportion of mainstream publications appear to be based upon its use". Obtaining ideas about how participant observation can be used and practised is therefore difficult. Cloke et al (2004) argue that this is because participant observation is an ethnographic method that involves spending an extended period of time immersed within a community with the hope of studying and understanding better "how different people understand the world and their place(s) within it; the routinization of everyday lives in time and space (including everyday locations such as the home; and the ways in which embodiments, memories, emotions and feelings are tied together in places and social/personal identities (Cloke et al 2004:180). This does not translate well into a classroom context where time and space is limited. As a
consequence of this there are only a few examples from the geographical literature that might aid or shed light on how an active learning exercise might be created to simulate the process of undertaking participant observation in a lecture context.

One exception to this is the work of Phil Crang (1994) whose vibrant descriptions and analysis of his time working in Smokey Joes restaurant provide a rich example of how participation in, and observation of, a particular setting can be written about. However, in my experience, encouraging students to simply read Crang’s work does not go far enough. Reading Crang’s work manages to convey how he writes about and observes his participation in the restaurant. It does not however convey the practice of observing or the visual immersion of the researcher in the circumstance/group under examination. Crang’s work does however offer one route into how students might be encouraged to actively learn (or learn through doing) about participant observation as a research method. My rationale for this is that central to Crang’s work and participant observation as a method is the practice of making detailed observational notes about the community within which the researcher is immersed. His article therefore acted as the stimulus for how I might create an active learning exercise for in the lecture (See Appendix 3 for a copy of this article). My challenge was to consider how the making of observational notes might be actively practised in the lecture context. In designing this learning exercise about how to actively learn from making observational notes I decided to implement Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) Seven Principles of Good Practice as a means to guide the design of the learning and teaching exercise.

4.4 ‘The Seven Principles of Good Practice’ (as applied to an active learning exercise designed to engage students with the research method of participant observation).

Broadly speaking good practice in learning and teaching is defined as "getting most students to use the high level cognitive processes that the more academic students use spontaneously" (Biggs 2003b:74). Although Cross and Steadman (1996) argue that the provision of lists or principles about good practice actually violates its own advice by prescribing pathways to knowledge rather than encouraging people to find their own answers, Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) efforts to provide guidance about how good practice may be encouraged in undergraduate learning is a good starting point.
for designing learning activities. Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven principles are stated as follows

1. Good practice encourages student-faculty contact
2. Good practice encourages cooperation among students
3. Good practice encourages active learning
4. Good practice gives prompt feedback
5. Good practice emphasises time on task
6. Good practice communicates high expectations
7. Good practice respects diverse talents and ways of knowing

For Chickering and Gamson (1987) active learning is central to the development of good practice. Active learning can be encouraged both through self guided learning and also developed through interaction with others. As Biggs (2003:79) argues when students are active in their learning their attention and concentration are aroused. More powerfully, when activities are keyed into academic objectives students get the benefit of the activity and also realise that it is a relevant activity. However, just because lecture rooms are traditionally associated with teacher directed activities and structurally offer less scope for activity than other settings this should not mean that lectures are inactive learning environments. For Biggs (2003:81) the key is selecting activities that will do what you want them to do in the teaching context you are in.

As I had explored and reflected on the issue of using film in learning and teaching for one of my induction assignments (see Chapter 2) I decided that one of the ways in which I might be able to encourage active student learning about participant observation as a research method was to integrate the use of a visual active learning exercise into the lecture on research methods. To engage with these seven dimensions the active learning session on participant observation was designed in the following way. I combined teacher directed activities (the lecture component) with self-directed activities (taking observational notes from a film) and peer-directed activities (group work activity to critically analyse the notes they had taken). I decided that the session would culminate in a short, interactive and informal class presentation with teacher/student feedback session.
What follows is a summary of the lecture session. I indicate, where appropriate, how I envisaged that the design of the learning exercise might stimulate active learning and good teaching practice. A copy of the PowerPoint slides produced to accompany the lecture can be found in Appendix 3.

**Good practice encourages student-faculty contact**

I began the lecture with an explanation of the aims and objectives of the session which were

- **Aim:** To explain to you how to practise the research method of Participant Observation

- **Objective:** To provide you with the experience of making observational notes and to develop your ability to critically analyze observational notes.

Following a brief discussion of the outline of the lecture I provided the students with a definition of participant observation and then elaborated on some methodological (theory and method) issues that they needed to be familiar with when thinking about adopting participant observation as a research method. At key points I asked the students if there was anything that needed clarification and rephrased things or repeated them where necessary. I provided students with an outline of the practicalities they needed to think through if they wanted to design a research project that used this kind of research method. I also highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of participant observation as a research method. The introductory session, of about 35 minutes, ended by providing students with an introduction to an example of the application of participant observation in human geography by outlining the work of Phil Crang on Smokey Joe’s. I made particular effort to emphasise how Phil’s research had emerged out of his observation of, participation in and reflection on his own everyday-experience of his part-time employment in Smokey Joe’s restaurant. I followed this contextual discussion with a summary of the key geographical themes that his work was to eventually explore. They included the

- managerial control of service delivery,
• performative character of waiting working in a restaurant (delivery of directionally given scripts and stage directions, management of interactions with customers)

• geographies of the stage and workplace regions and the importance of workplace/character of job.

The second section of the lecture involved the students undertaking an individual 5 - 10 minute observation exercise. I explained that to simulate making observational notes, the exercise would involve students making notes on two scenes from the film Gosford Park directed by Robert Altman. (The scenes were chosen because they depicted everyday interactions between servants and guests. The film was selected for this purpose because of a) its historic setting - which ensured that it was not an environment that students would have had prior experience of, b) its everyday depiction of life for the servants employed at Gosford Park and c) the parallels that existed between the subject matter of Crang’s study of the service industry and Gosford Parks focus on servants serving the guests at a countryhouse) The students were given clear directions about note taking to encourage them to make notes around the types of themes that form the basis for any early observations made during a participant observation research project that is not yet thematically focussed. The students were advised to copy down the list to structure their note taking. The note taking themes are listed below.

• Where and when: place, time and date

• Space: layout of setting, rooms and outdoor space

• Actors: names and details of people involved

• Activities: activities of actors

• Objects: physical elements; furniture

• Acts: Specific individual actions

• Events: particular occasions

• Timings: sequences of acts or events

• Purpose or goals: what were the motivations behind act or event

• Feelings: emotions in particular contexts
After the observation exercise I solicited oral feedback from the group for around 5 minutes about how they had approached the note taking exercise and asked them to divulge some of the types of things that they had written down. Their responses about their note taking techniques varied substantially. This was as expected and provided me with the opportunity to give the students feedback and reassure students that it was quite common for people to adopt diverse note taking styles. My hope was that by creating an environment where contact could be made between the students and my own research experience they would be able to gain confidence in sharing how they had approached the exercise. This was followed by a 5 minute break.

**Good practice encourages cooperation among students & Good practice encourages active learning**

The third section of the lecture aimed to develop cooperation among students and encourage active learning. Students were divided into six groups and asked to analyse their notes for observational evidence from the film that might explore and illuminate one of the following themes.

- Spatial divisions of labour
- Geographies of class
- Geographies of gender
- Managerial control of service delivery
- Performative character of waiting
- Geographies of the stage and workplace 'Regions'

**Good practice emphasises time on task**

The themes were selected to provide an overlap with those studied by Phil Crang and consequently "build on the known" (Biggs 2003:76) of the session by getting students to explore themes we had already briefly discussed. The importance of this task as was further emphasised as each group was asked to nominate a spokes person to briefly present the findings of the group to the rest of the class. The group analysis task was to take 20 minutes followed by 1 - 2 minute presentations. It was explained to the students that this amount of time had been given over to the practise of critical analysing their notes because this representative of the amount of time it was
necessary to spend sifting through and critically analysing observational notes after they had been created in a 'real' research context.

*Good practice respects diverse talents and ways of knowing & Good practice gives prompt feedback*

I used the presentation exercise as an opportunity to reassure students that participant observation as a research method encouraged diverse talents and ways of knowing. As there were a variety of ways that students could have illustrated the themes they had been asked to analyse their notes for I was able to provide students with prompt feedback about their observations and the analysis of their observations. This hopefully further developed their individual and collective confidence in developing diverse ways of knowing about the world. Following the presentations I provided the group with generic feedback about a range of different ways that I might have focussed my observations (on individuals, communities of people, social group studies, organisational and institutional studies).

The final section of the lecture returned to a more formal lecture environment and covered questions of research roles in participant observation. I emphasised that during the exercise, although actively learning about participant observation, the students had adopted the passive role of an observer. When practicing participant observation research they would be active participants as well. By making this point I was then able to explore the variety of different techniques researchers needed to adopt to make research notes 'in the field'. I also outlined what the key stages were in writing up participant observation research.

*Good practice communicates high expectations*

The lecture concluded with a brief explanation of the key features of the participant observation project. I explained that if the students were able to replicate the high standard of work that they had produced in the lecture class they would produce some innovative and exciting pieces of participant observation research for their coursework.
To assess whether the different dimensions of good practice had been successfully implemented, feedback on the session was solicited from both the students in the lecture class and also from the PGCTHE co-ordinator Dr Luke Desforges who was asked if he would observe the session.

4.5 Feedback and reflection

At the end of the participant observation session I was able to obtain feedback about the visual active learning exercise from 42 members of the class. The feedback sheets for the session can be found in Appendix 3.

If good practice is "getting most students to use the high level cognitive processes that the more academic students use spontaneously" (Biggs 2003b:74) the feedback indicates that the exercise had played a positive role in helping the majority of the 42 students to understand and practise how observations could be made and analysed critically. This can be evidenced by examining the answers they provided to questions about their understanding of the role the visual exercise had played in helping them to practise writing down observations. It was also evident in terms of how the students expressed the benefits they had gained from practising the research method both as individuals and in groups.

In particular the feedback indicated that the session had introduced students to the idea that it was possible "to come to see the world through the interaction of people" and that people and communities could be "subjectively" understood "by looking at their experiences". This introduction to diverse ways of knowing about the world clearly hit home with the students. The idea that place could be "observed as a performance" was particularly appealing to one student and that "power relations could be observed in practice" appealed to another. Many students found the exercise a stimulating advancement of their knowledge. They liked the idea that research material could be generated "through involvement over a long period of time" and that "your involvement will aid your understanding of the researched" as it did not just give you "one attempt at gaining information as in an institution". Several however commented on the ethical issues that might arise from conducting overt/covert research. Pleasingly however, this was seen as an insight that might be applied
to "tutorial work that they were undertaking on ethical practice" and it might provide "an idea for a dissertation methodology".

At an individual level the time spent on the active learning task appeared to have an impact on student learning. One student said the observational task had helped them to "gain an understanding of how to put down ideas that I had on paper and focus them". For another student "the guidance about what sort of things to look for and note down was useful". For a different student the exercise emphasised that "effective note taking was important". The observation helped another student to "gain an understanding of all of the different forms of participant observation to study and give a hands on approach to identifying the themes within them". This theme was emphasised again when a student said that "the group work allowed the method to be understood rather than just being told".

On the theme of group work as a process of encouraging cooperation and active learning, one student noted that the group work was useful because "it brainstormed our ideas and helped each other get a deeper understanding of our observations", "the exchange of different ideas within groups led to greater understanding of what is involved in participant observation". This was because "you could see what other people did which was good to help you pick up on ideas you hadn't focussed on". Another student said that this was because the group work "helped to break the data we had down and convert that into relevant geographical thought. This helped us to think in a new way". In particular one student liked the fact that the group exercise had encouraged them to give "different ideas on what you can include for observations, not just people but objects and such like". Another student saw that the group exercise had helped him to acknowledge the limitation of his own initial note taking strategy. The student said initially "I made two headings of servants and hosts/guests and compared the two. I now realise that I could have made many more sub groups to help understand the data more". Perhaps most strikingly one student wrote that the exercise "made me think more deeply into certain things that would normally be ignored".

Two students stated that if the exercise had to be changed they would remove the need for people to present at the end. The role that staff-student contact and prompt
feedback played in the success of the exercise was also noted. On the topic of the group presentations one student noted that "by going through each point after the group work with examples meant any uncertainties were clarified". Overwhelmingly, the use of the video generated positive feedback and many students stated that the exercise should not be changed. Students even suggested having smaller groups so that they could discuss their notes in more detail. There were also suggestions that they would have liked to have had more time to do the exercise and would liked to have seen the video again after they had undertaken the exercise or seen more of the video to practise the technique of participant observation further. Furthermore, student made important point that the session might have been improved by "an example of how someone familiar with the method would have looked at and made noted on the same scene". I think this is a particularly valuable observation and it is a comment that I would aim to integrate into any revision of the session that I make.

I found Luke Desforges comments on the session particularly illuminating especially as Luke has experience of teaching on this particular module and is aware of both the opportunities and limitations on teaching a course of this nature. Overall his comments were incredibly complimentary about the role of the visual exercise to cultivate research-led teaching. I found this reassuring for although I was pleased with how the session had gone I was aware that I had run short of time towards the end of the class and had to go quickly over the content of some of the final slides. His full comments on the session can be found in Appendix 5. The observations that Luke made of the learning and teaching exercise and the discussion that we had that followed helped me to reflect upon how I might revise and improve the research-led teaching exercise.

On reflection, three pointers emerged from our discussion of the session that I felt were particularly relevant to the future development of the session and which I intend to integrate into the session next year. Firstly, Luke reminded me that students often approached their learning in an assessment focussed manner. He suggested that even though the class engagement with the exercise had been excellent had the discussion of the assessment taken place at the beginning of the session, rather than the end, I might have been able to encourage some students to adopt a more strategic approach to their learning in the session. It would also have given the students the duration of
the session to work out what the assessment was about. This would have meant that
they could have asked questions about the assessment in person, during the session,
rather at the end when time were running short. Secondly, Luke suggested that it
might have been worthwhile asking the students to do some pre lecture reading and
get them to read Phil Crang’s article before the lecture. By drawing on material
already familiar to them I could "build on the known" (Biggs 2003:76) and hopefully
enhance their learning further. The third point that Luke raised was the importance of
not just organising students into working groups but also encouraging them to
rearrange themselves into more clustered working groups. Luke explained that this
might encourage all of the students to participate as a group in a new location rather
than being hindered in their discussions by being stretched out along a bench.

Ultimately, the success of this exercise to stimulate active learning could be
evaluated by an examination of the marks students obtained for the Participant
Observation coursework they submitted. Overall, the students performed well. All the
students who submitted project work gained a pass mark, the majority gained above
60% and 4 gained 70% or above. This was a substantial improvement in the previous
year. Appendix 3 contains an example of one piece of coursework that utilised the
research method explored in this session particularly well.

The following Chapter explores how to engage small groups with the Issue of
employability.