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Developing Teaching: Reports and Reflections

Observing Uno: Practicing participant observation through a card game

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Abstract:
In this article, I want to share and reflect upon a classroom activity that I have developed to practice participant observation skills with undergraduate students: a modified version of the card game Uno, in which some students are cast as players, while others slip into the role of observers. I have found this to be a playful but effective way of creating a shared understanding of what it takes to do participant observation research. After sketching out the aims of the exercise and describing how it practiced in our class, I will reflect on some take-away lessons and adaptations.

Keywords: Participant observation; ethnography; in-class exercise; card game

Introduction

In this article, I want to share and reflect upon a classroom activity that I have developed to practice participant observation skills with undergraduate students who are newly introduced to the method of ethnographic research. As a stepping stone between reading about ethnographic methods (in textbooks as well as research articles) and doing their own research in the field, I wanted to develop an activity that could give them a first teaser of what it means to do participant observation and to jot down field notes, and which could be conducted during class. For four years now, I have done this through a slightly modified version of the card game Uno, in which some students are cast as players, while others slip into the role of observers who take note of different elements of the interactions that unfold. I have tweaked the activity slightly over the years, and have found it be a playful but effective way of creating a shared understanding of what it takes to do participant observation research. In the following, I will begin by sketching out the motivations that drove me to develop this activity. In the second section, I will then describe it in the way in which it is currently practiced in our class, and could potentially be adopted or adapted by other instructors looking for playful ways of teaching observational skills. I will then reflect on some of the take-away lessons that the students and I have distilled together over the years; as well as on some of the adaptations that have been made over time and that might be possible in the future.

The Motivation, Objectives and Constraints

Several years ago, I took the lead in developing a seven-week skills training called *Doing Ethnography*, in which undergraduate students would conduct a small research project that would require them to do fieldwork outside of class, and come together weekly to reflect on their progress and prepare their next steps. I had previously experienced that most students were quite capable of abstractly understanding and summarising the principles of qualitative and ethnographic research on the basis of textbook readings,[1] but that setting them into practice could be a fairly daunting and disorienting matter for many of them. Therefore, I wanted to give them a first experience of engaging in ethnographic research during class, so that they could build up some basic skills and confidence before they go out into the field.

However, I was also acutely aware of the constraints imposed by time and space when it comes to doing participant observation during a two-hour class session: it would not be possible for students to stray out far

[1] For the purposes of the skills training that I describe here, we start out by having all students read a short introductory text about ethnographic methods (Walsh & Seale, 2018). The main additional resources that we recommend to students are the textbooks by Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault (2016) and Vivanco (2017).

beyond the physical space of the classroom. Also, since multiple tutors would be teaching the same course in parallel, it would be likely that the first encounters that students would have upon leaving the classroom would be *other* budding ethnographers, which might create rather limited content for their observations. Therefore, I was on the lookout for a more structured activity to do (and observe) within the classroom walls. Conversations with colleagues generated some interesting ideas, such as having students observe a goldfish in a fishbowl – which seemed like a great way of forcing them to pay attention to non-verbal cues and refrain from speculating too much about motivations of those observed, but which could also prove challenging not only for the teacher who would have to bring in a goldfish, but also for first-time observers, who might not acquire the confidence that they are now well-prepared to study human interactions. Another colleague suggested an activity where some students (designated as observers) would be sent out of the room, while the remaining students receive instructions on how to interact with each other; once the observers would return, they would have to figure out through their observational skills, and without talking, what rules and customs were guiding these human interactions. This rather playful activity made me think, why not just do something like this, but with an actual game?

The idea seemed to fit not only with my didactic goals for the session, but also with my private interest in board games and an emerging professional interest in the use and design of games as an educational resource (Dumit, 2017; Hoy, 2018; Huang & Levinson, 2012; Supper & Wyatt, 2016). I ended up settling on a game of Uno, a game which I expected most students to have at least a passing familiarity with, and which would be quick to learn if students were not familiar.[2] Inspired by the idea of observing goldfish, I decided that the game should be played silently, so that the observers would be forced to pay attention to body-language and other non-verbal cues – yet I also wanted to disrupt the silence sometimes, by instructing a few selected students to break the rules of the silent game, so that some interesting moments tension or even conflict would emerge. Since I wanted to bring across the fact that there is more than *one* way of being an observer, I decided to give instructions not only to the players of the game, but also to the observers: each of them would be given slightly different instructions for what to observe. Over the years, the activity has been adapted slightly; for instance, by cutting the amount of time spent on instructions, and putting more emphasis on tension than on silence. However, I will first describe how we currently use this game in class, before reflecting on some of the changes that I have made and some of the lessons that the students and I learned along the way.

The Activity: Practicing Observational Skills Through a Game of Uno

This educational activity can be conducted as an in-class exercise and can be completed in about one hour, though it is more comfortably paced at two hours, as this gives students more time to develop their jottings into field notes and to reflect on what they have learned. It has been tested on groups of 8-16 undergraduate students. The following materials are needed: a pack of Uno cards, some printed role cards with instructions (described below), and some pens and paper (or electronic devices) on which the observers take notes.

Between three and six students are designated as observers. Any students who are unfamiliar with the game of Uno should ideally be given the status of observers. These observers are each dealt a secret role card, which state the following instructions; for larger groups, the same card can be handed out twice:

> Observer 1 (and 4): Pretend that you are from a culture in which the concept concepts "game", "play" and "player" are not known; describe what you see without any reference to the game Uno or any other games you have witnessed. You can walk around freely and look at anything you like, except the numbered role cards for the participants and observers. Jot down some notes about what you see to help you remember and report later.
>
> Observer 2 (and 5): You are observing a game of UNO, focussing on moments of tension, confusion and disagreement. What happens when players infringe on the rules, or disagree on what those rules even are? How are tensions dealt with or resolved? You can walk around freely and look at anything you like, except the numbered role cards for the participants and observers. Jot down some notes about what you see to help you remember.
>
> Observer 3 (and 6): You will be observing the observers. However, your research mission is a covert one, so don't give away immediately that you are more interested in what the observers are doing than what the players are doing. You can walk around freely and look at anything you like, except the numbered role cards for the

[2] In the four years that I have taught this activity to groups of mostly-European undergraduate students, it has held true that the majority of students have been familiar with the game. On one occasion, a student even pulled out his own pack of cards from his backpack, which he apparently carried with him at all times!

> participants and observers. Take some notes that help you report back about how the other observers go about their activities.

The remaining students are designated as players/participants. Ideally, these students should be familiar with the game of Uno, or at least should be confident in their ability to learn a simple card game quickly. If they are familiar with the game, it is not necessary to give instructions about the rules; the process of negotiating between different house rules that almost certainly will exist between the students can be part of the observational exercise. All participants are dealt a secret role card as well, which are grouped into two different categories:

> Participant 1 (3, 5, etc.): You are a player in the game of UNO. But out of respect for this serious learning environment, no talking is allowed. So be quiet! If it is your turn to say "Uno", please don't say anything, but knock on the table instead.
> Good luck and have fun!
>
> Participant 2 (4, 6, etc.): You are a player in the game of UNO. Don't mind the observers, just focus on winning the game! And please remember: a game is only fun if there's also a bit of banter and playful conversation going on while you're playing!
> Good luck and have fun!

It is important that none of the students are aware of the content of the cards that other students have been dealt; if they are sufficiently focused on their own role, they often do not even realise that others have received different instructions from them.

The instructor then deals the cards, ideally dealing 5 instead of the standard 7 cards to allow for a shorter game. If the game does not come to a natural close within 15 minutes, the instructor can step in and declare it as a tie. It is difficult to predict the exact dynamics of the game that unfolds; for instance, some groups show a clear dividing line between students who talk and those who play silently, while others reach a middle ground where all participants limit themselves to talking as little as possible but do say a word here or there when necessary. Similarly, some observers might stay in a stationary place (this is more likely to be the case if they are taking notes on a laptops) while others will move around the room. Regardless of how the game unfolds exactly, the different observers should have sufficient material to work with.

After the game is over or has been declared a tie, students are given a few minutes (more if the time allows) to go over their jottings and prepare a short report about what they have observed. Those who were acting as players/participants so far, can be instructed to write up a short report describing the physical setting and atmosphere of the activity. Then, the students report back, starting with the players, followed by Observer 1, then Observer 2, then Observer 3. The fact that Observer 3 was observing the observers should be revealed only in the course of their report. The instructor can ask follow-up questions along the way; for instance, an observer might note that someone appeared frustrated without specifying the observable behaviour that led them to this assumption about the player's emotional state. At the end of the exercise, some time should be taken to collectively reflect on what has been learned from this activity, and what advice can be taken away from the activity when it comes to doing participant observation research outside of the classroom.

The Take-Away Messages for Students

It goes without saying that the quality of the observers' reports will vary a great deal from one case to another. Working with a larger group (and thus, six rather than three observers) can actually help to mitigate this, as it is always instructive to hear how two different observers carried out their observations differently, despite having received the same instructions. However, even if the initial students' report leave a lot of room for improvement, the exercise should provide enough food for thought that some take-away messages can be distilled from it. Ideally, the students themselves should be able to draw some conclusions from this exercise on the basis of the reports that they have heard; however, where necessary, the instructor should help in providing some guidance about what they are expected to have learned from the exercise. Some of the lessons that we have distilled from this activity include:

- A detailed description of setting, place and context of what you are observing is important. This can include not just what you see, but also what you hear, smell, etc.
- Drawings and diagrams (even if they are of questionable artistic quality) can be helpful additions to written field notes, both to help the memory and to provide a stable grid in which you can try to capture movement and actions.

- Take note of body-language, gestures and facial expressions. Following the gaze of those you observe can be a good way of understanding how they see the world and what they pay attention to.
- Be detailed in how you describe what you observe, and don't jump immediately to your own interpretations (although you can include those, separately). For instance, instead of writing "the person looked annoyed when taking two cards", write something like "The person rolled their eyes when taking two cards. I understood this to mean that she was frustrated about the course of events."
- In most cases, field notes will include some summarising statements about things you observed repeatedly. However, make sure to support those summaries with detailed, 'thick' descriptions of particular scenes that stand out (either because they are very representative of what you've observed, or because they are somehow unusual). Usually, the process of selecting specific scenes to write out in more detail happens as you transform your quick 'jottings' made during your observations into more comprehensive field notes.
- Pretending to yourself that you do not understand what you are observing (e.g. describing the actions in a game as though you have no idea what games are and why people might participate in them) can be a good strategy to force you to pay all the more attention to that which you can actually observe.
- It can be a good strategy to mix up what you are doing after a certain amount of time. This may involve moving around physically to a different observer position, and/or shifting your attention towards different aspects of what you are observing.
- Don't write yourself "out" of your own observations: take note of your own position in relation to those you observe (both literally, in terms of where you are located, and figuratively, in terms of how you relate to and interact with your environment). Acknowledge your own biases.
- Don't shy away from noting down the things that you find puzzling or you don't know! The gaps in your understanding can be informative of the phenomenon you are trying to understand in its own right (e.g. are there behaviours you expected to find but did not, things that people don't seem to talk about openly, etc.), as well as potentially pointing you towards what you can still learn in later stages of your research.

Some Reflections on the Activity and its Adaptations

As briefly alluded to above, the activity has been adapted slightly over the years. The most notable change was born out of necessity when I was asked to do a demo of it for a group of colleagues, in a timeslot of only 30 minutes, which meant that I had to cut away the instructions that I used to give to students. While previously, I had provided detailed instructions to all Uno players to play the game quietly and given them a refresher on the rules of the game before getting started (some students were then dealt a secret card instructing them to make some noise or give the 'wrong' sign when it was their turn to say 'Uno'), I now decided to provide all instructions through the medium of the role cards. It turned out that this adaptation, born out of necessity, actually improved the dynamics of the game, as the moments of confusion about the rules added an interesting element to the dynamics being observed. More importantly, of course, it meant that the amount of time for instructions could be reduced, giving more time for reflections.

The aspect of timing is also the reason why my most successful experience with this activity was at a time when educational activities mostly took place online because of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the rest of the course took place online in that year, we were able to offer some optional on-campus educational activities, following strict social distancing guidelines and on a voluntary basis for students. This allowed us to spend a full 2-hour session on this activity, where usually we only take about half of that amount of time, since we have to combine it with other educational content that was now covered during the online class. The inclusion of hand sanitisers, and the ceremony of having a player walk up to the pile of cards from a distance, introduced some interesting dynamics for the observers to take note of; but more importantly, the longer timeframe allowed for more in-depth reporting and reflections. If possible, I would therefore always recommend doing this session over two hours (though ideally, outside of pandemic conditions).

Another change that was introduced over the years was the role description for the 'observer 2'. In its current iteration, observer 2 is instructed to pay attention to moments of tension or disagreement. In the past, the card used to read:

> You will be observing a card game of UNO – but wait a moment, isn't something a bit off? It seems that the members of this culture play this game differently to what you're used to. But how is it different, exactly? And what happens when players infringe on the rules?

This prompt did not invite any practices of thick descriptions (Geertz 1973), as many students merely stuck to identifying how the game deviated from standard rules of Uno. While some of the more insightful observers nonetheless produced interesting observations on infringements of the rules, it almost seemed like they were able to do so despite, rather than because of, the instructions that they had been dealt. The adapted version does a better job of inviting students to pay in-depth attention to specific, interesting dynamics, instead of providing generalisations.

The activity provides additional scope for adaptation. For instance, I have considered the inclusion of a 'covert observer', who looks and acts like a player but is secretly taking mental notes about the activities that they engage with. I refrained from this so far because this role would be more challenging than the other roles; but I would consider including it for a group of graduate students or professional academics, especially as it would help to break down the unhelpful dichotomy between 'participants' and 'observers', to show a fuller spectrum of possible observer roles (see Walsh & Seale, 2016, p.262).

Finally, a very similar activity with different role cards could of course be conducted with just about any other card game or board game, provided it is sufficiently well-known and/or sufficiently simple to be learned quickly with minimal instructions.

Conclusions

In this reflective piece, I have introduced an educational activity to familiarise undergraduate students with the craft of participant observation. Developed from the desire to introduce a hands-on educational activity that could be performed during class, but limited by constraints of time and space, I have found the medium of a card game an effective way of giving students a first experience of what it means to do ethnographic research. One specific limitation that I have encountered with this activity is that it implies a rather strict distinction between the roles of 'observers' and those of 'participants'; however, the inclusion of an observer who observes the other observers helps to break out of this dynamic somewhat, and it can be further problematised during the discussion and reflection. While the activity plays out slightly differently each time, it so far has never failed to generate relevant pointers and advice for students as they undertake their first ethnographic research projects. Perhaps equally important, students generally seem to enjoy the rather playful character of the exercise, which helps to take away some of their potential intimidation at the idea of performing ethnographic research.

* Templates for the role cards are available to download from the accompanying post in the Teaching Anthropology Resources section:
https://teachinganthropology.org/2023/01/23/practicing-participant-observation-with-a-game-of-uno/

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Disclosure statement

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