Project description and position paper: Performative Ethnographic Studies of Management Practices in Organizations

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Project description

My project concerns the relationship between theory and practice in professional educations (university colleges). My PhD-scholarship is affiliated to and financed by the much wider project ‘Bridging the Gap between theory and practice in professional education programmes. In my own project I want to explore how practice (understood as the future professional practice of the students) is articulated1 in the daily lives at two university colleges.

My dissertation will be based on an anthropological fieldwork which I will conduct on two chosen university colleges. In those educational organizations I plan to do participant observation and thereby observe how the students and teachers articulate the future professional practice of the students in different contexts. For instance in the classrooms during lectures, group work, and when the students are “alone” in lunch breaks and social arrangements. Furthermore I wish, as a part of my method, to compare two educational settings. I plan to do fieldwork both at a teacher education and at a school of bachelor engineers. This method will add a comparative perspective to my analysis by allowing me to study how practice is articulated at an education focused on relations and a more technical education.

Thus far, my theoretical foundation or inspiration is a practice theoretical perspective. I wish to understand the articulation of the students’ professional practice as a practice in their everyday lives inspired by de Certeau’s (1988) two concepts strategies and tactics. I intend my project to enter the field of educational theory with a particular focus on processes of socialization and the creation of professional identity (for instance with inspiration from Foucault 1982 and Aihwa Ong 1996). I am also inspired by the research on the field of professional educations such as Krejsler 2004 and Edwards 1996. With this theoretical foundation I intend to explore how different contexts and social settings

1 I understand articulate in the broadest way possible. In Danish I use the word “italesættelse” which could also be translated to enunciated, put into words, discursively construct. I’m still working on a specific translation because I’m still working on my specific understanding and use of the concept. I do explore this further in the position paper.
influence the way the students’ future practice is articulated and how the different articulations affect the way the students become socialized to their professional practice. In this problem statement I also see an interesting aspect involving the students’ (social) imaginaries (Taylor 2004) about their future practice. Which imaginaries about practice are articulated in different contexts and how do they affect the students’ social processes of becoming in relation to their professional identity.

**Position paper**

I am still in the phase of planning my ethnographic fieldwork so I have yet to obtain data and empirical findings. However, since I have a background as an anthropologist I have some experience in conducting fieldwork. Therefore, in this positioning of my project within the course literature I will reflect on the topic and focus of my project and how the articles from symposium one inspire me to turn this into a fieldwork. Next I will reflect on my experiences and position on fieldwork as an ethnographic method inspired by some of the course literature. In this second part of the paper I am inspired by some of the articles from symposium two. Since I have no empirical findings yet I will not be able to fulfill the last preparation requirement and experiment with ethnographic writing. I will however make a short note in the end of the paper reflecting on an article from symposium three.

The articles about the performative turn (Barad 2003 and Licoppe 2010) inspire me to sharpen the focus in my upcoming fieldwork where I wish to do participant observation. The focus of my project this far has been on how the students at the teacher education and school of engineers articulate their upcoming practice. By practice I here mean the professional practice of teachers and engineers which the students are being educated to perform in the future. When doing the fieldwork I expect that a significant part of the articulation of practice will be observed by noticing what the students and educators say about their professional practice. This focus on language needs to be positioned in relation to the points made by Barad, Licoppe, Butler and others about the performative turn in social science. Barad (2003) criticizes the linguistic turn by arguing that it has presented language and words with too much power. This, she contends, has resulted in the unfortunate case that some researchers tend to think that language represents a deeper meaning and by studying and decoding language we can understand the people we study (Barad 2003). This is not what I wish to do. With inspiration from Barad and Licoppe (2010) I emphasize that I want to explore how the articulation of practice is being performed in the daily life of the students. By this statement I mean that I will not only focus on what is being said about their future practice but also the contexts in which this is being said. And also the relations in the conversation – what is being said to whom, in which room and which situation? And also what is not being said in the same rooms, relations and situations. Also, following Licoppe’s (inspired by Butler, Licoppe 2010:181) argument about discourse, I plan to study the articulations of the students’ future practice as a process. By doing this I will try to focus on the articulation as a process, where the
words being said in specific situations are a part of and relates to earlier conversations. These reflections have consequences for my fieldwork since they widen my perspective and let my informants perform their articulations and imaginaries of their future practice with their surroundings, relations and situations. While doing participant observation I will focus on these performances allowing me to incorporate many aspects of my informants’ lives in my process of trying to understand them.

I agree with the point made by both Despret and Bramming et al that “methods do not represent the object of study” (Bramming et al 2010:2) and that your choice of method also have an effect on the empirical findings in your ethnographic study (Despret 2005). Furthermore Despret argue that our bias and preconceived knowledge about the subjects we study determine the ways of social behavior we let the informants show us (Despret 2005). Bramming et al explore in their article how we as researchers can overcome these obstacles and let the informants show us what is important to be studied. Following Barad they argue that ethnographic researchers should avoid an unequivocal focus on linguistic representation and through a performative approach focus “on following the constitutive processes of the field” and thereby study how “performative discursive practices produce rather than describe the conditions of knowledge practices” (Bramming et al 2010:8).

I am inspired by the idea of performance as a way of letting my informants decide what is important to be studied. In addition to agreeing to these points I would argue that the problems of representation also could be obliged by the method of fieldwork and participant observation. When studying a group of people as thoroughly as is done in a long term fieldwork you give the people a chance to decide what should be important for the researcher. In many ways the ideas behind the snaplog method resemble my approach to the ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation. As noted earlier, the performative turn is a quite constructive inspiration in designing my focus for my upcoming fieldwork, but I would also argue that the fieldwork and the position the anthropologist has in the field opens up for a performative study. In my project I would enter my field with an open mind as to what is important to my informants in relation to their future practice and in their education. By being a part of their daily life for a long period of time I will study “what the field does and wants” (Bramming et al 2010) and thereby studying (and being a part of) the performative discursive practices.

I do not wish to make the point that by doing long term fieldwork you “become” like the informants studied and thereby getting a 100 % access to the field (see Bramming et al 2010:16). Reflections and considerations of your position in the field are extremely important in analyzing the data obtained and must be acknowledged as something influencing the results. Position in this context can both be understood as your preconceived knowledge about the field – the way Despret and Bramming et al are discussing the constraining powers of method – but also the position your body and self adopt in the field. Gender, age and temperament are just some of the factors that can influence your data.
At the end of this paper I want to make a very short note on the third symposium about ethnographic writing. Having been brought up as a researcher at an anthropological department I have been inspired by the way Clifford Geertz (and in different ways many other anthropologists) depicts his empirical findings by loyally describing situations almost as a novel (Geertz 1972). This is an inspiring way for me both to read and write about empirical findings. I find that giving yourself an active role in the description of situations from your fieldwork also shows the reader the positioning of the researcher and the implications of this position on the analysis. In accordance with the critique of the linguistic turn this way of writing ethnographically also allows for more than just the words to be analyzed. I may not wish to write literarily to the same extent as Geertz, but I do like to use passages from my fieldnotes in my analytical work to try to include many details from the contexts and not just quoting my informants' words.
References


