

Ethnography in Education: methodologies & epistemologies

Carmen Lúcia Guimarães de Mattos

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7709-9489>

Abstract: Ethnography in education: methodologies and epistemologies is the topic of this dossier of the journal Cadernos de Pesquisa from the Graduate Program in Education, Federal University of Maranhão. The subject of this set of articles is the discussion of the tensions between method and epistemology in ethnographic research. In the constant crisis of legitimacy in the field of education, ethnography has been widely used as a methodology in different fields of knowledge. Ethnography is increasingly explored in education, and the topic needs to be understood more clearly by researchers and scholars in the area. The dossier therefore faces this challenge by bringing into the light of academic knowledge a set of eight articles and an interview. The articles originate from research that was prepared to conceptualize, analyze, and describe different faces of ethnography mediated by the interconnection of these two dimensions, which, in principle, are taken as antagonistic but are faces of the same coin. The set of articles presented ranges from thematic nuances relevant to classical ethnography, such as the field of research and the participative research, to current and controversial topics such as autoethnography and netnography. The authors are former members of the Nucleus of Ethnography in Education of the State University of Rio de Janeiro (NetEdu/Uerj) as well as some prominent international consultants associated, among them, we highlight the presence of Frederick Erickson, a distinguished representative of ethnography in education. This dossier aims to enquire deeper into the topics and renewed the reader's interest in them through innovative and creative approaches.

Keywords: qualitative research; ethnography; methodology; epistemology; education.

Presentation

This dossier presents the interlinkage of methodologies and epistemologies through the central theme of ethnography in education. Despite the apparent opposition between these two dimensions, we understand ethnography not as a method but as an epistemology of knowledge.

The selected articles are derived from research using an ethnographic approach. It generally, includes these two dimensions. Taken as complementary, the method and the theory are embedded in research, so, although with distinct objects of study, the articles focus on this interlinkage, sometimes prepondering the method and others the epistemology, but always stimulating our thinking about both.



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It is understood that the theoretical-epistemological dimension pervades the methodological, which does not mean to say that the method is subordinated to the theory or to the attention of its assumptions in an inflexible way; the ethnographic making, by its nature, presupposes the use and the creation of an episteme. The typical socio-cultural reality in ethnographic studies is the juxtaposition of theory and practice. This means that each researcher has his own way of doing ethnography, and this way is not trivial, as it follows defined principles a priori that can give rise to theories. The practice of doing ethnography leads the ethnographer to elaborate hypotheses and synthesized in dialectics with theories he knows or builds according to the instruments he uses.

Ethnography is considered marginal in the field of humanities; it remains in a constant “crisis of trust,” although it is being adopted more and more in the area of education. Ethnography establishes itself as a research approach or an epistemology of knowledge in studies of human interactions. And, thus, it allows the researcher’s approach to the social subject to have numerous variations: differences in action and in thinking; specificities in relationships with others; diversity in the impressions that are imposed on the world in relation to himself and others; socio-educational determinisms, among others.

More than an approach or method, current ethnography is part of the process. teaching and learning that informs ways of seeing and acting in the world of the school and the institutions that surround it. To the extent that ethnography is understood as such and its principles are applied to education, we can say that the researcher’s reflectivity on his practices, experiences, and pedagogies modifies this process and consequently the ways in which ethnographic work is carried out. Frederick Erickson’s teachings on ethnography applied to education establish that the exercise of ethnographic research is marked by practices that are “culturally sensitive,” both to traditional principles and to contemporary forms of ethnographic doing. In this context, we can take as an example the use of artificial intelligence (AI) with function in the most advanced computer programs of data analysis, widely used for content analysis by contemporary ethnographers. They are powerful algorithms acting as intuitive and intelligent machines in the analysis of large volumes of data that emerge from new forms of communication and human interaction on social networks.

The general objective of this dossier is to broaden the scope of ethnographic studies, taking as a premise their understanding of methodology and epistemology in an innovative and creative way. However, the ways of doing ethnography are not unique or exclusive; they imply the application of some characteristics that have remained essential in this approach. They are: Understand the subject of research as an agent of his own knowledge; study for a long period of time a certain place; record in detail the events that occurred in this place; inductively analyze the data, from the particular to the general, returning to the particular; establish a dialectical relationship between objectivity and subjectivity; carry out

a critical-analytical reflection on the records, seeking their local significance for the research subject; write a dense description about: subjects, places, events, scenes, facts, etc. Use ethnographic vignettes; interpret data on multiple levels; be concerned about the influence of history; and constantly seek an ethical stance.

The selected articles focus on one of the dimensions, use the ethnographic approach, or deepen epistemologies. Thematic choices include conceptual discussions or methodological-epistemological explanations related to ethnographic research in education. We present eight articles and an interview within this scope.

The first article, *entitled Reimagined Ethnographies: the use of videoetnografia in education by Frederick Erickson and Carmen de Mattos*, is an essay on ethnography and videoethnography from the perspectives of Frederick Eriksson and Carmen Lúcia Guimarães de Matos. He, an eminent ethnographer dedicated to the study of the classroom, generously contributed a session of the article where he addresses aspects relevant to ethnography and some of its developments. While Mattos argues about the pioneering of the authors in the use of video ethnography and microethnography in education, The article illustrates the authors' arguments with ethnographic vignettes derived from their research. Thus, it helps to elucidate relevant aspects of classical ethnography and articulates future possibilities in this research approach.

The second text, *entitled Autoethnography: self, identity, and reflection as categories of analysis in ethnography*, is by Carmen Lúcia Guimarães de Mattos, Alessandra dos Santos, and Valentina Grion, researchers from different fields of knowledge who share complementary views on the object of study. Mattos is an educator and researcher active in ethnographic research in education. Santos is a philosopher and scholar of computational analysis techniques. Grion is an educator and scholar of the theories associated with the student voice approach. They present an article on an innovative topic in ethnography, which has gained prominence in various fields of knowledge. From a corpus of data in English, they analyze 286 scientific documents using the digital content analysis platform Atlas.ti23. These analyses allowed us to derive relevant categories: self, identity, and reflection. The text has a dual function: to demonstrate the results of the analysis of digital content and to discuss the concept and developments of autoethnography.

Luis Paulo Cruz Borges, Sandra Maciel de Almeida and Suziane de Santana Vasconcellos present a classic ethnographic theme in the third article, *The Field Work in Ethnography: Being There and Writing Here*. The authors are well-versed in ethnography, having participated in various field research projects from their scientific initiation to their current roles as university professors. The article addresses their powerful doctoral researches: Borges, in a school on the periphery of the territory known as "Grande Rio," Almeida, in the context of prison schools, and Vasconcellos, in a multi-repeater's classroom in the region of the lakes

of Rio de Janeiro. They challenge the reader to look closely at the school contexts where students and teachers are waging a silent battle towards educational exclusion, demonstrating that the field of research is more than research without itself; it is the forger of theories.

Nishi Mitra vom Berg authored the fourth article, *Researching Intimate Violence Against Women from Feminist Ethnography*. She is an anthropologist, researcher, critical activist, and scholar of issues involving violence against girls and women in Bombay, India. Her contribution to ethnographic research encompasses a little-studied but prominent approach in the field of gender studies, feminist ethnographies. The author is an expert on controversial topics such as child marriage, permitted in India, and brings to light the results of research on domestic violence, exploring the feminist and ontological understanding of the issue. The article presents, from a socio-anthropological perspective, the tensions between praxis and theories in this field of study.

The fifth article, entitled *Participating in Research in Ethnography: The Importance of the Student as a Subject of Research*, is by Sandra Cordeiro de Melo, a psychologist, university professor, and researcher specializing in inclusive education and dedicated to studies on autism in the school context. Melo has a brilliant trajectory in ethnography; since graduation, she has acted as an ethnologist in different research contexts. Distancing herself from her passion for inclusion studies with students, she presents a text on the interactions between teachers and professionals in a government school and analyses it ethnographically. The participating research, the subject of her contribution to this dossier, is shown in detail with the contribution of Erving Goffman's micro-sociologies, which helps the author shed light on aspects of classroom dynamics in this context.

The sixth article, entitled *Ethnography in dangerous places: education and poverty in territories dominated by militias*, by Antonia Valbenia Aurélio Rosa, Rafael dos Santos, and Thiago Luiz Alves dos Santos, deals with the research locus. The authors, initiated in ethnographic research by teachers at different universities, share their concerns with public policies that minimize inequalities, not only in the educational system as a whole but among marginalized, excluded, and living in exceptional spaces permeated by violence and disrespect for human rights. The article is based on Rosa's doctoral thesis and highlights one of the aspects that almost made his studies impossible: the fact that doing ethnography in dangerous places requires more than academic knowledge, but familiarity with the restrictions imposed on subjects who inhabit these spaces. Santos and Santos contribute to the advancement of the challenging task of linking research in a school setting with the actions of armed groups, such as militias, who wield significant control over their subjects.

The seventh article, entitled *Art-Ethnography and the Theatre of the Oppressed: Educational Dialogue in Non-formal Spaces with the MareMoTO Group*, by Igor Federici Trombini and Alessio Surian. The authors combine common interests that include a passion for

alternative arts. Igor, in his gentle performance in Brazilian indigenous movements, and Alessio, a polyglot and academic of the first line who is an ecologist by choice, act in the university and outside it with the intention of diversity, of the difference, and of making the difference in education. This combination can be demonstrated in this article, which is based on Igor's master's dissertation and was evaluated by Alessio. The ethnography that they practice, almost intuitively, is found in the text in the form of art-ethnography. This approach is gaining widespread support in education due to its potential to enhance various performative activities that involve school culture, particularly in non-formal settings. Thus, the contribution of the article is the learning opportunity provoked by the description of a didactic experience experienced by the theatre in an unconventional space.

The eighth article, entitled – *Researching the Network, in the Network and With the Network: Articulations and perspectives of Netnography*, by Walcéa Barreto Alves, Cleonice Puggian and Juliana Rebelo Ferreira, deals with a recent and challenging topic in ethnography, the cyber space. Alves is a psychologist and educator, an exquisite ethnographer and interested in the interconnection between education, psychology and the digital universe of networked technologies. Puggian, a brilliant academic with a background in the most prestigious universities in Brazil and the world (Uerj, PUC/RIO, Harvard and Cambridge), has an interest in studies on environmental education, believing that the education of women can change the scenario of impoverishment and inequality relevant to the city's victims of the predatory action of man on nature. Rebelo Ferreira, a Ph.D. student in Portugal, experiences the opportunity to experience a diasporic movement from here to there, which contributes greatly to the strengthening of this group of authors. The current and dynamic text deals with netnography as a methodology, deals mainly with warnings about the use of the Internet as a means and space of research. It contributes to broadening the concept of digital ethnography and extends to what will become IAethnography with the attention focused on aspects of ethics and cybersecurity, the text closes this dossier in great style.

The ninth and last, titled *Ethnographic Experiences: An Interview with Frederick Erickson, is an interview* by Vera Anselmi Melis Paolillo, today the Representative of Brazil at the World Forum Foundation. In 1998, she reports a conversation that became an interview between her, Professor Frederick Erickson, and Professor Carmen Lúcia Guimarães de Mattos, during the 19th Annual Ethnography in Education Research Forum. Paolillo, an experienced educator and researcher, led the conversation after elaborating on the topic and the questions to be asked. In the interview, Erickson explains how ethnographers experience various ways in which people describe human experiences, using simple language and socio-anthropological knowledge to explore the transition from practical application to academic knowledge in research. Reading this interview clarifies some of the uncertainties of young researchers around “being and doing ethnography.”

In conclusion, this dossier has the potential to become a document of reference for students, teachers, and researchers interested in ethnography in education. It fulfils its goal of helping those who wish to venture into the field of research in education understand the role of methodology and epistemology in ethnography.

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MINI BIOGRAPHY

Carmen Lúcia Guimarães de Mattos

The professor has retired from her position at the University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (Uerj). Postdoctoral studies by the universities: University of British Columbia; University of Cambridge; University of Sydney; and Sorbonne of Université René Descartes. The University of Pennsylvania awarded me a Ph.D. and a Master's degree in education.

E-mail: clgmattos@gmail.com