Research Paper Education

Participant Observation: in The Context of Indian Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to understand the participant observation skill. In spite of deep interest among social scientists in participant-observation field methods there is little published work on how to develop an insight to understand these methods. In this paper the author used this method to gather information regarding the classroom interaction between the teacher and the students. I have attempted to examine some of the aspects which appear to be inherent in using the human instrument for gathering interpersonal data in spite of that it is one of the most powerful and effective way in which we try to understand our fellow being. Though I have limited my analysis to participant observation on a classroom interaction between teacher and the student, but I believe that it has broader application. The core paper assesses participant observation for unique features, applications and to inspire social scientists to work upon to refine and sensitize the human instrument to insure greater validity of the data gathered.

KEYWORDS Participant Observation, Classroom, Teacher-student interaction

Introduction

There's no theory that no observation is wasted because it's a chance to practise one's observation skills. But an unsuccessful observation for the right job will lower one's moral and waste everybody's time in short term. And a successful observation for the wrong job will lower ones' moral and waste everybody's time in the long term. My focus in this paper is on the classroom interaction between teacher and the students, limiting it to mainly the language transaction taking place for which I decided to observe classes of any subject at school level. Then I finalized to observe five classes of English subject of 10th standard. I did this observation in one of the government school. I was trying to achieve 'participant as observer' identity by answering only those questions of the students which did not intervene with my observation process and I picked only those pieces of information from this conversation which proved substantial for my overall understanding about observation. Herbert J. Gans (1999) said," a researcher-participant, is the one participates in social situations but is personally only partially involved so that he(s) can function as a researcher, in order to be free to observe, retain neutrality and curb the emotional involvement". I tried to keep my role as a researcher as neutral, open and truthful as possible as I was highly influenced by words of Olesen and Whittaker (1968)," in the course of a social research, roles are established, reestablished, negotiated and renegotiated on the basis of the exchanges taking place between the researcher and the researched". Therefore to keep the maximum objectivity intact, I explained about my task to the teacher concerned in full and true details beforehand. The purpose of this participant observation is to develop an understanding of the complex social settings and complex social relationships by seeing them holistically. On the basis of the understanding about participant observation, I developed an observation schedule for the class observation.

Access to the field

Access to the field is one of the major aspects of any research study, especially one including participant observation as that governs your data in turn your findings, hugely, as is also demarcated by Herbert J.Gans (1999) that the participant observer's first problem is entry. He gets the data on the basis of his ability to be admitted to the situations he wants to study. In my case though I had realized this fact, where I was warmly welcomed by the English teacher as I was referred to her by my friend as she is also a staff member of that school. But next time I did not want it to happen. I directly went to the teacher concerned, though, the influence of the other teacher still lingered on. This points to the fact that your entry into the field, and the identity of the person who provides you access, makes a huge difference to the data, and this subjectivity can only be minimized with the increased number of field visits as even pointed out by Martyn (2008) that if the researcher is to do an observation of interaction in a classroom, the researcher needs to ensure that the research occurs across the full school month and throughout the full school days as confining the observations to just some days or to just one subject will not provide an accurate picture. At the same time the longer the observer is 'on site', the more his/her presence would be taken for granted and the lesser the significant effect he will have on the proceedings.

Role of Field Notes

Field notes plays a very important role in Participant observation as it helps you not to miss out anything and enables you to keep the focus intact by reporting and containing all the information and later using the relevant facts that substantiate the subject of the research. Field notes help in recording the contextual factors precisely because it has the tendency to de-contextualize the things it records, which later helps to explain the events observed and also understand comprehensively the data collected. Though in taking the field notes one should be very cautious as while engaging in the action as a participant is likely to disrupt the naturalness of the setting along with disclosing your identity as a researcher, so one should be very careful while taking the field notes. While taking my field notes I tried to write very less, taking the help of tools and also the symbols and shortcuts.

Relevance of Observation Schedule

During my first observation developing a tool seemed necessary to me as I needed a quick way to jot down everything but still do not disturb the setting of the class too much, as it happened last time when students saw me taking down notes constantly, which is also reflected by Gans (1999) that, "Preserving the naturalness of the setting is the key priority for participant observation. The principal concern is to minimize disruption so as to be able to see things as they normally occur- unaffected by any awareness that the research is happening". Thus, with the help of my previous experience and in order to record the details in a much systematic manner I decided to formulate a self-made tool in the form of checklist cum rating scale so that the findings may be assembled and used properly. I tried to encapsulate all the major categories

and sub-categories within it in such a way that the tool can be used across different settings to understand and observe the same aspect, that is the overall scenario of a classroom in a much simple, sequential and systematic way. Having an observation schedule ready provides an answer to the problems associated with the selective perception of observers, and it appears to produce objective observations. The schedule effectively eliminates any bias from the current emotions or personal background of the observer. It provides a means for collecting substantial amounts of data in a relatively short time span and for this purpose the items included in the schedule should be precisely the most significant and most relevant as it is not possible or feasible to include everything.

Subjectivity

Even you being conscious all the time as a researcher who is trying to be as objective as possible, may bring in subjectivity as you being on guard all the time too makes us interpret and see certain things in a particular way. The problem is thus where to draw the line between objectivity and subjectivity, as, no matter how hard you try, subjectivity sweeps in, in one form or the other, you as a researcher, as a human being can never have a non-reactive, neutral, unbiased or unprejudiced presence, and therefore it is rather better to acknowledge the subjectivity and understand it just like that the presence of the researcher, though it can be reduced, but it will affect the field for sure. Though the strategy of the researcher is always to be as unobtrusive as possible but a 'convenient hide' i.e. the observer's ability to 'fade into the background', is not possible in this case. Huge complexity is involved in any research situation also because the researcher may be perceived in different terms by different members of the same institution.

Identity of the researched

The importance of keeping the identities and information about the institutes, people and authorities who have been researched upon unrevealed, especially if you are asked to do so as this reflects the ethical issues involved in any kind of research work. It is important for the researcher to understand the importance of ethics, and not use any data collected which discloses the identities of the people, authorities or settings researched as doing so may cause ethical problems arising from the absence of content on the part of those being observed, and deception by the researcher.

Things I learned

I noticed that how the clothing of the researcher too matters to a great extent, especially in the case of girls, since I wore jeans this time as compared to the suit last time; I was looked at differently not only by the students but also by the teachers and other staff members. Now the two things I could understand were that clothing is also contextual, as a female researcher wearing jeans in a government school scenario and in a high class private school scenario could reflect different attitudes of students as well as teachers. It also made me realize that clothing is thus crucial to look neutral in the field work as it hugely accounts for the feeling of comfort an acceptance on the part of the researcher in the group he is entering. Another new thought clicked me this time after I was done with my observation process. The whole procedure and the proceedings of the day got me thinking as to what effect my presence would have left on children's mind. From the way the children looked at me, when I went to school this time, clearly showed that they had discussed me with their teacher or vice-versa. Though this aspect has got nothing to do with my task, but looking at it through the students perspective, it really got me thinking, because I remember really well how I as a kid used to tell all the happenings at my school to my parents and how even the small events that happened at school, though forgotten in the long term, had a certain impact on my thoughts. I as a researcher could not take my mind off about even the various small incidents that took place in the school. On close observation I noticed that throughout the class there wasn't any reference to religion, culture or social background directed on to the students by the teacher, but here comes in the constraint of very less number of observations to comment in a justified manner, but if I have to analyze it in just one single class's context, I think it is quite good on part of the teacher to not to do so, and rather keep her focus on the content at least while teaching, wherein every students is treated equally and likewise. The location, age, sex, ethnicity, skills, qualifications, social background and lifestyle of the researcher provides another barrier to the findings, especially in the field work involving participant observation, as is substantiated by Martyn (2008), when he points out that "the biological factors place severe constraints on the access/ non-access to situation." Also the competence of each individual researcher is a major factor that has to be taken into consideration, as every individuals 'senses boost their sensitivity to certain particular signals depending on their specific emotional and physical state and their personal experiences. And it is because of this, that different researchers produce different impressions of the same situations. Now, in order to minimize this, if not erase it, is needed a tool or an instrument that can bring about clarity as well as consistency in the observation process and it is precisely by the systematic observation and its use of an observation schedule. The whole purpose and aim of the schedule is to minimize, possible eliminate the variations in the data based on individual perceptions of events and situations by making the observers alert to the same activities and directing their attention only to the same specific things. In this way, the recordings of the events would be consistent between various researchers.

The most crucial is the way you prepare yourself beforehand, decide upon all the aspects you want to explore, how you record the data, how you need to be attentive and quick, and also be well versed in using various kinds of tools, along with the tactful conversation skills that you need to develop in order to get the useful and needed information. The aspect of quality of data needs to be worked upon, as the number of observation being very less; the right kind of conclusions could not be drawn. A very small amount of information gathered has been generalized here and is therefore sure to have a lot of loopholes and shortcomings, which can be overcome only by increasing the number of classroom observations.

Conclusion

It was a beautiful experience that added to my experiences, but also made me understand the complexity of not just the observation process but also aware of how seen and imagine and felt, things and situations are all different from each other and that how each leads to a different sort of experience altogether and the most beneficial outcome of the whole activity is that it gave me a lot of food for thought. Also my ultimate understanding told me that no matter how many articles, magazines, papers, etc. we read, the setting is different each time we go to the field, in observation what we really need to deal with varied situations is practice and as much increased number of field visits as possible as each time we get to know, explore, understand, learn, see something totally new and fresh.

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