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Uses

◆ "Illuminative" evaluation:

Ethnography is useful for long-term and longitudinal studies of programmes. It concentrates on accounting for the observed setting rather than comparison between settings.

◆ Evaluation of use and the user:

Ethnographic evaluation can investigate the user's point of view. It can help in forms of participative design eliciting the point of view of those who will use the system, both educators and students. In particular, ethnography can draw out 'tacit' knowledge, the taken for granted aspects of work often overlooked.

◆ "Nth phase" evaluation:

This is an iterative design process in which ethnographic research plays two roles. First, it is used to clarify requirements prior to the design of a new system. Then, it is used to provide continuous feedback for redesign and modification.

Process involved

1. Outline

The essence of an ethnographic approach is 'in situ' observation. The events being observed should be as little disturbed and as authentic as possible. Sources of information may include:

- ◆ Naturally occurring documentation.
- ◆ Participant observation.
- ◆ Audio and video recording.
- ◆ Field notes and transcribed conversation.

2. Practicalities

Analysis and Data Collection

Analysis and data collection are not distinct phases, they occur simultaneously. Both are 'messy' and involve the use of human beings as the instrument of observation. Ethnography relies upon detail to convey the feel as well as the facts of an observed setting.

A "thick description" provides context that interprets observed actions and provides meaning to these actions. In this way analysis can fuse with description.

A "thin description" would only detail events whereas a thick description would try to analyse possible intent and the interpretation of events by participants. As a result, verbatim quotations can be the most identifiable feature of an ethnography. This can give a sense of immediacy as well as providing a record for judging any interpretations made.

Access to any situation has to be negotiated. This often involves 'gate keepers'; people who can help to introduce you to the setting with little disturbance. A good introduction can be the key to success.

Be careful to be clear when you know enough. Ethnography presents a problem of completeness, in sociology and anthropology. Fieldwork can take years. For an evaluation a rule of thumb could be feeling you know what's going on having a sense of the routine and especially knowing what you don't know or haven't seen.



low



low



high



high



moderate

Be discrete. You will come to know parts of a setting unknown to others, especially those with authority. Your aim is to gather information without disturbing the setting you are in. Often this means keeping knowledge gained from one source unknown to others.

The Role of the Observer

A central feature of ethnography is the stance taken by the observer. Indifference characterises ethnography. In this context indifference expresses an uncritical stance that doesn't set out to judge what is observed. This 'natural attitude' can be essential in gaining and maintaining trust.

Reporting

Because information may be embarrassing or jeopardise individuals the researcher must be careful to make reports as anonymous as possible. This can prove difficult if the research is 'in house'.

Variations

The level of analysis can vary greatly. This might vary from a conversation analysis (fine grain technique) to a broader analysis concentrating not only on the detail of specific interactions but also on the context and general features of the setting for the study.

The technique is essentially descriptive. When used for evaluation a balance has to be drawn between neutrality and judgement.

Full ethnographies are extensive and can take years of observation and analysis. Evaluation involves a trade-off between time taken and adequacy of description. Evaluative use generally involves 'quick and dirty' techniques.

Other Relevant Pages

Recipes

- Designing experiments
- Observation techniques
- Trials
- Nominal group technique

Information Pages

- Isolation or integration
- Pedagogical toolkit
- Pre and post testing
- Statistics questions
- Student sample

Serving suggestions

References

Innocent or informed ethnography? Ethnography can begin with either a novice or an expert set of assumptions. For evaluation purposes it is better to begin with an innocent approach that doesn't assume knowledge of what is important. Evaluators do not know in advance what will turn out to be important or interesting, even if they feel they have some good ideas. The strength of ethnography often lies in the surprise finding.

Don't go native. Immersion in a field can lead to the researcher adopting the attitudes and outlook of the participants. Blending in has to be balanced against conversion.