**In ED 800 we have explored forms of educational inquiry reflecting: philosophical themes, teachers' experience, psychology and learning theory, the content and organization of the curriculum, biography and history, international experience, the personal introspective essay, and ethnographic participant observation. Choose one form of inquiry from our course and write an essay of approximately 1,500 words explaining why it is a fruitful approach to studying education. In your essay include attention to these features of the form of inquiry you choose: 1) Its distinctive approach to inquiry; 2) Its suitability for the study of particular kinds of educational problems and issues; and  3) The accessibility and utility of the results of inquiry to teachers, scholars, administrators, and other  groups with interests in education.**

Ethnography is literally defined as people (ethno-) and writing (-graphy). It has its roots in anthropology but it is now seen in all areas of social science research, from sports to communication to education. In order to understand ethnography, one needs to understand the use of the term culture and the method of participant observation. Culture is a broad term and in this paper will be defined by shared beliefs and values of a group of people. The purpose of this essay is to understand participant observation and ethnography and explore its distinctive approach to inquiry. The suitability of this method in studying particular educational problems as well as the accessibility of the results of the inquiry to teachers will drive the analysis of the chosen method of inquiry. Educational ethnography and arts of education will be used as examples of understanding the reason why ethnographic participant observation can be considered among the most effective way of inquiry within social sciences. Founders and leading individuals of participant observation such as Spindler, Malinowski and Boas will be used additionally to emphasize the operational nature of ethnography in education. Furthermore, the main advantages and disadvantages of the chosen method of inquiry will be analyzed in order to have a more clear and precise view of participant observation towards the end of the paper.

Ethnographic research does not always clearly fit into the clinical/ experimental model of research environment by most institutional ethical reviews panels (Flick U.: xvi). It promotes a more qualitative way of inquiry, which gives a more deep understanding of the subject studied. It does not represent a deep analysis of authors, writings and journals but rather it offers direct participation and observance of the case studied. Malinowski and Boas were both strong advocates of field- based research and both advocated what has come to be known as participant observation. Ethnographic participant observation is a way of conducting research that places the researcher in the midst of community he/she is studying (Flick U.: 2). Today it is almost in every sector of life- in political science, management, education, nursing, criminology, social psychology- and one of the great consequences of all this is the large amount of literature about participant observation itself (Bernard R. H.: 260). The outcomes of ethnographic data and the ethnographic report take the form of narrative, meaning a kind of extended story whose main goal is to lead the reader into a partially direct experience of the community in which the ethnographer has lived and interacted (Flick U.: 16).

Ethnography literally means a description of a people. It is important to understand that ethnography deals with people in the collective sense, not with individuals. As such, it is a way of studying people in organized, enduring groups, which are characterized as communities or societies (Flick U.: 1). The distinct way of life that characterizes its group is its culture. The study of culture involves an examination of the group’s learned and common behaviors, customs and beliefs (Flick U.: 1). Taking this point to the educational inquiry things are becoming a bit more complicated since education is a sector will a wide rang of social beliefs and customs with not a common pattern. In terms of its suitability of analyzing educational problems it is worth noting the complexity within the definition of education as well as the complexity that education has in real practical terms. Moreover, participant observation is a well- qualified means of inquiry as it involves direct participation for solving an educational problem. More analytically, each educational problem is distinctive in nature and there is no fixed pattern to be applied and solve it. It rather needs careful close consideration and observation in order to have the positive outcomes. In arts education, it is usual for researchers to engage actively and creatively with their respondents and this can be seen as a strength in terms of ‘getting on the inside’ of the observed phenomena and achieving some kind of empathy with the other players; that is known as the ‘emic’ approach (Hickman R.: 18). Emic knowledge is considered crucial for an intuitive and empathic understanding of cultural phenomena and is a precondition for the effective ethnographic fieldwork. It can be contrasted with the ‘etic’ approach, which uses data that is stated in terms of the theoretical categories that are considered as meaningful and suitable by the scientific community (Hickman R.: 18).

Ethnographic methods have the longest track record of the qualitative methods in use today (Heck R. H.: 381). They involve certain methods of collecting data and the written record produced at the end of the inquiry is the product of using those techniques. Its distinctive approach to inquiry and education evolves the direct participation of the observer/ researcher and even the engagement of the researcher in the group studied. Postmodern and post- structural approaches focus on deconstructing the knowledge gained from traditional theories and raise questions about how researchers and their texts influence the construction of scientific knowledge (Heck R. H.: 377). For example, in a special education public school classroom, the researcher might take the role of an assistant teacher in order to become integrated into the classroom and interact naturally as data are collected until the inquiry will be completed (LanMan M. K.: 179).

Talking about the effectiveness as a method of inquiry of ethnographic participant observation it is essential to note the so-called Educational ethnography. Moreover, its mere definition is the examination of the culture of schools. The father of this kind of ethnography is George Spindler who brought ethnography to the educational setting. Through the years, educational ethnography has been also translated as ‘classroom inquiry’ or ‘anthropology and education’ or ‘ethnography of schooling’ (LanMan M. K.: 179). Interest first developed in this area of anthropology because schools were seen as a central setting where culture is transmitted from generation to generation. Moreover, studying with the use of ethnographic participant observation an educational inquiry is also a way of learning the culture of the group studied.

Another issue raised in this paper is the accessibility of results to teachers and other group with interest to education. It becomes, now more than ever, quite easy due to the expansion of interest and communications. Like any other mean of inquiry the results are becoming available with no obstacles, in terms of their research. Although the ethnographic participant observer may need to live among the group studied far away from his/her home, the outcomes of the research will be distributed quickly with the various means of communication.

It is essential for the effectiveness of the paper to note that, as any other form of inquiry, ethnographic participant observation has certain advantages and disadvantages. In this essay some profound ones will be explored for the clarity of the argument presented in favor of participant observation. More precisely, ethnographic participant observation is chosen as a distinctive method of inquiry due to the advantage that it has and takes the viewpoint of the participants rather than the researcher. The researcher can also dig deep into social interaction and create new insights for the subject studied. On the contrary, the fact that cannot be checked or repeated for reliability purpose is a significant disadvantage of this method. Also, the fact that the researcher’s presence may change the behavior of the group is another great limitation. The whole process can be considered, additionally, as time consuming in relation to the subject studied.

Where did the concept of ethnographic participant observation come from? How its methodology contributes to the researcher’s inquiry? Does it still have any use in contemporary sociology and education? Is still being used? Or it has been replaced by other methodologies? Those questions tried to be explored in this paper with the task to emphasize the importance, as a method of inquiry, of ethnographic participant observation. Becoming part of the shared beliefs and customs of a particular group gives to the researcher the opportunity to study in real terms and not in large libraries with dozens of books written by other authors. In other words, it is a method of inquiry, especially in the educational sector, where close examination and analysis of the problem is essential. Now, more than ever, the accessibility of the results of inquiry is available to anyone due to the global technological age that this century entails. In social sciences and qualitative research, ethnography is seen as one of the finest research methods. It is thought that greater and more valid inferences can be drawn from the repeated incidents that extended field exposure uniquely provides.

References

* Agar M, The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography, 1980, San Diego, Academic Press.
* Bernard R H, ‘Participant Observation’, Research Methods in Anthropology, 2011, United Kingdom, AltaMira Press: 256- 290.
* Boas F, A Franz Boas Reader: The Shaping of American Anthropology 1883- 1911, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.
* Flick U, ‘Preface’ ‘Introduction’ ‘Ethnography and Participant Observation’, Doing Ethnography and Observational Research, 2007, London, Sage Publications Ltd.: xv- xviii, 1- 18.
* Heck R H, ‘Conceptualizing and Conducting Meaningful Research Studies in Education’ in Conrad F C and Serlin C R (eds.), The SAGE Handbook for Research in Education, California USA, SAGE Publications Inc.: 373- 384.
* Hickman R, ‘The Nature of Research in Arts Education’, Research in Art & Design Education: Issues and Exemplars, 2008, Chicago USA, The University of Chicago Press: 16- 24.
* LanMan M K D’ Amato C R, ‘Ethnography’ in Bursztyn A (ed.), The Praeger Handbook of Special Education, 2007, United Kingdom, British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data: 179- 181.
* Spindler G, Doing the Anthropology of Schooling: Educational Anthropology in Action, 1982, USA, Waveland Press Inc.
* Young W M, The Ethnography of Malinowski; The Trobriand Islands 1915- 18, 1979, USA, Martinez Books.