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Familiarity and Distance in Ethnographic Fieldwork: Field Positions and Relations in Adult Education

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Familiarity and distance is an issue that is much discussed in ethnographic fieldwork. This paper focuses on the topic of balancing familiarity and distance when the researcher is directly or indirectly part of the field, which in the study consists of an adult education context of two different teacher-training courses for upper secondary teachers. The fieldworker is also a teacher at one of the courses in the study, which is thus in a double sense framed by the challenge of an adult education study. The analysis is based on Bourdieu's concept of participant objectification and Gold's categorising of roles in ethnographic fieldwork. It illustrates how different contexts depending on the prior familiarity of the fieldworker provide access to different degrees of participation. The particular adult education context and fieldworker relations complicate the fieldwork relations and the act of balancing familiarity and distance.

Introduction

Handling roles, relationships, familiarity, and distance in fieldwork constitutes recurrent challenges to educational ethnographers (Delamont et al., 2010). After overcoming the challenge of obtaining access to the field and the participants' views, the researcher has to balance between different positions of familiarity and distance. For instance, the researcher can distance himself from one party (the teachers) by giving the other party (the participants) access to his log book with field notes (Jachyra et al., 2015). In the same study, the researcher chose clothing that gave him the opportunity to be a part of the youths' environment and thus obtain an insider position. This illustrates that in contexts where there are several parties, it may be necessary to prioritise access to some informants rather than others.

Just as it can be problematic to create partisanship by sharing one's field notes with informants, it can also be problematic not to do so. It is considered to be a generally widespread practice that the researcher does not share his or her field notes as part of a non-reciprocal communicative stance to the field (Lefstein, 2010, p. 82). The non-reciprocal communicative stance can consist of silently observing, signalling ignorance, or taking a role as an interviewer, where one is asking questions and avoids having to provide answers. It can however seem artificial and create an inappropriate distance to the field if the researcher does not reveal him/herself and participate in open conversations. The reciprocal communicative stance can help to pave the way for informants' knowledge and thus provide access to important research knowledge.

In the research process, the researcher needs to make decisions in relation to communication, which is an example of how access must be seen as an integrated part of the whole research

process and not only as an initial tactical challenge (Cipollone & Stich, 2012, p. 26). The involvement of emotions in qualitative studies can be another way to establish closer contact with informants (Collins & Cooper, 2014), which also applies to fieldworkers who have some form of shared background with the informants (Jansson & Nikolaidou, 2013).

In ethnographic fieldwork, it is also crucial to be aware of different perspectives amongst different actors who can have different experiences of inequality or different opportunities for being able to act (Santoro, 2014), including also differences of age (Ceaser, 2014). Thus, adults are usually assumed to have a specific approach to learning e.g. to take responsibility for their own learning, make active choices about participation and use coherent strategies (Illeris, 2015). This assumption influences the observation of such processes. Likewise, there can be differences and similarities between informants and observers, for example in relation to experience and educational background that must be subject to participant objectification (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1996) and reflected in relation to findings in ethnographic fieldwork (Delamont et al., 2010). To deal with such analytical challenges, we focus on an adult education context in which the researcher doing the fieldwork has a background as teacher in the same or similar context as the ones studied. On this basis, our main research question is: How is a balance between familiarity and distance established when the fieldworker in different ways is part of the field?

Adult education as critical case

In adult education, different forms of didactics and learning prevail (Rasmussen, 2006; Illeris, 2015). Attending a course as an adult can be seen as involving an opportunity to learn but also as a pressure related to the labour market and competition for jobs, which constitutes an important part of the critical case for analysis.

The study is focused on courses for new teachers at upper secondary educations in Denmark. The students have different backgrounds and reasons for choosing to become teachers and opting for the compulsory teacher training courses, which constitutes the adult education context in this study (Duch, 2017). Some of the students are educated as skilled workers and some of them are graduates from university and this big variation in educational background can give an observer, as this paper will show, different positions in observations in relations to familiarity and distance. Studies also show that there can be very different reasons for returning to education in adult life, which can be about improving future job opportunities or more personal reasons for participating in education (Cocklin, 1996, p. 89).

The students in our study have to attend and complete the teacher education to get a permanent position. Therefore, studying learning in such adult education contexts can be a very delicate matter. It can be linked with challenges of obtaining access in the first instance, and in the next demands that the researcher balances carefully between different roles of familiarity and distance in relation to the research subjects. Familiarity and distance is a common problem in a variety of contexts but our assumption is that the problem is put on the tip of adult education, which therefore represents as a kind of an extreme case (Yin, 2014). In a Danish context, adult education takes place in a `parallel system´ offering the same educational levels as the `general educational system' but the target group consists in adults from 18 years and above.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical point of departure is Bourdieu's standpoint of objectifying the researcher relationship to the teacher's position and Gold's categories of roles in field observations (Gold, 1958; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1996). Gold has classified fieldwork in four categories (Gold, 1958). These have different forms of access as their goals, and the categories include

different roles and relationships. The four categories are: 'complete participant', 'participant-as-observer', 'observer-as-participant', and 'complete observer'.

Complete participant involves the observed not knowing that they are being observed, and 'role-pretence is a basic theme' (Gold, 1958, p. 219). This leads to two challenges. On the one hand, researchers must not be so aware of their role so that they cannot play the role of participant. On the other hand, researchers must not 'go native', so that they become too esoteric and cannot convey their findings. In other words, that it gives 'pretended roles which call for delicate balances between demands of role and self' (Gold, 1958, p. 220).

Participant-as-observer involves both the informant and the observer being clear about the field roles. Here, the challenge is to avoid identifying too much with the actors in the field so that one risks becoming too much a part of the field and too little a fieldworker (Gold, 1958).

Observer-as-participant is a role with less risk of 'going native'. Since the fieldwork is typically short-term, it also involves the risk that 'the observer-as-participant inclines more to feel threatened' and that misunderstandings can occur more easily (Gold, 1958, p. 221).

Complete observer is a role that means a complete absence of interaction. Here, there is little chance of going native, but there is a considerable chance of ethnocentrism; that is, that the researcher understands observations based on his or her own assumptions rather than on the ones of the field. 'While watching the rest of the world roll by, a complete observer may feel comfortably detached, for he takes no self-risks' (Gold, 1958, p. 222). Gold (1958, p. 223) concludes: 'In any case, the foregoing discussion has suggested that a fieldworker selects and plays a role so that he, being who he is, can best study those aspects of society in which he is interested.'

In ethnographic fieldwork, there is on the one hand an ideal about an insider perspective, but there are also advantages with maintaining distance (Gold, 1958). Independent of positions, there are challenges in the chosen roles and relationships. For some ethnographers, the ideal is familiarity and participation to such a wide extent as possible, since one assumes that, based on such an approach, the observed will act more naturally and will 'perform' less (Walford, 2008, p. 9). However, participation must not result in the researcher allowing him/herself to be completely consumed by the field and not being able to create a necessary analytical distance.

Bourdieu describes the necessary analytical distance with the concept of participant objectification, which means breaking with one's very deep and unconscious feelings of solidarity with the research object (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1996, p. 234). He concedes that this is extremely difficult, since such feelings are often what made one venture into the theme in the first instance. The objectification process involves giving up the idea of absolute objectivity and taking analytically all the points of view possible (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 625), while also objectifying the pretention of being an omniscient observer.

The researcher's cultural capital, language, and gender are significant in research, and at the same time these factors are understood as expressions of forms of power in a culture that must also be made an object of reflexivity in the research process (Bourdieu, 1999). Factors such as social affiliations and classes, which can be expressed in language, clothing, and physical appearance, are important for the fieldworker's possible relationships and roles (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). All in all, Bourdieu encourages the researcher asking questions about his or her own conceptions, the implicit assumptions they build on, and continuously resituating one's points of view on the researched points of views in the social space (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1996, p. 217).

In the analysis, we have taken advantage of the specific opportunity for objectification that cooperation between researchers with different fieldwork positions allows. The person who carried out the fieldwork has a specific insider familiarity, while the one who did not participate in it and therefore has an outsider position, can ask critical questions and thereby contribute to creating an analytical distance. When we use Gold's classifications in the analysis, we illustrate the complexity in roles and relationships in practice.

The fieldwork contexts

The background for the fieldwork is a study[1] on adults' learning in a double case context of teacher education in Denmark. In both case contexts, 'new teachers' – i.e. teachers who are within their first years of employment – have to complete a teacher-training course if they want to become permanent members of teaching staff. It is thus adult education courses that are connected to the labour market and have a clear aim with regard to work.

The first case is a *vocational teacher training course*, which is organised in six modules of typically six days each and has a total of 60 ECTS points[2]. The modularisation means that participation is individualised and that the modules throughout the course of the individual participant are not peopled by the same group of participants. Participants have to complete six course modules to fulfil the criteria of the 60 ECTS points. Three of the modules have a compulsory content, while two build on elective themes, and then the final project assignment counts as a module.

Fieldwork in this course context was carried out over a two year period from 2015 to 2017. The fieldworker did observations on eight days of the course, covering all of the course modules and following different participants. She also followed the course participants in

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[1] The study is part of a PhD which was completed in 2017 (Duch, 2017)
[2] ECTS stands for European Credit Transfer System, in which 60 ECTS equals a one year full time study

their practice as teachers at the vocational colleges where they work, which involved a total of eight observation days and interviews with twenty students.

The second case is a *course for gymnasium teachers*, who teach at general upper secondary school level. It is also a one year course, which is organised as five boarding courses of each three days in addition to five individual teaching days. Boarding courses are characterised by the teachers staying in a hotel during the course, where they are together full time and might have scheduled activities in the nights. Participants at this course follow the same group in some of the courses and typically complete the course within a calendar year; they have to participate in all of the five boarding courses. Fieldwork in this second course context was carried out in the spring 2017. It included 12 days of observations that all, except one, involved participation in the boarding courses.

Both authors have work-related experiences from upper secondary school educations. One of us has completed the fieldwork in both contexts, is employed at a university college, and has taught on both of the mentioned teacher education courses. The other has not participated as fieldworker but has stepped in for the analysis of these at a later point in time. Therefore, the paper's methodological considerations have a specific relevance for our collaboration, since our different relations to the course contexts create both challenges and potential in relation to objectifying the role of the researcher.

Through their different arrangements, the courses allow the possibility of different forms of familiarity and distance. On the vocational teacher training course there were only short breaks and lunch breaks, which allowed for only brief periods of informal contact with the participants. As opposed to this, on the course for gymnasium teachers, several of the lessons took place at boarding courses, where the observer had lots of opportunity to participate in

informal contexts such as group meals at the course locations. In our analysis we include extracts from both contexts, dealing with them in turn and focusing on the roles and positions offered and chosen by the observer during the observations.

The examples that are used share certain common traits that will structure the analysis. First, an example of classroom teaching is given. In this form of teaching, there is a number of conventions for the roles of teacher and student; roles that are a part of defining familiarity and distance for the observer. Subsequently, examples are given of the group work, where the observer has the opportunity to physically move around with a view to establishing familiarity. Finally, examples are given of informal situations in which the observer achieves a familiarity that provides insights that are important for the interpretation of observations in classroom teaching. The examples represent a selection of data that are illustrative of situations from the positions and relations between informant and observer.

When we analyse each of the cases in more detail, we outline criteria's for categorising familiarity and distance. Informants' and observers' educational level, age and working experiences constitute background variables, which – as mentioned above – are found to influence their relationship in the fieldwork. We also point out the visibility of the writing of field notes since it in some situations seems important.

The vocational teacher training course – marked by relative formality and distance

Using an explorative approach, the purpose of the study in the vocational teacher training course was to study how vocational college teachers are socialised through an obligatory pedagogical education. Thus, the focus and approach of the observations were based on the vocational college teachers who have roles as students. Accordingly, in the analysis and for the sake of distinguishing between teacher and students in the observed situations, we mostly

name the course participants 'students' although they are also considered 'participants in adult education'. The heads of the selected vocational colleges were gatekeepers in regard to gaining access; but in relation to observations on the pedagogical education, the teachers on the courses function as gatekeepers. The selection of observation days depended on at least one of the 20 students as key informants being present. Based on the data collected, a familiarity was built up of especially eight of the students who had been part of focus group interviews and observed on the teacher education and at the vocational college.

One of the parties in the observations was the teacher, who as mentioned was the gatekeeper in relation to gaining access to observing the education. Thus, the teacher had given access to the observation and has informed the students via the education's online platform. Likewise, the teacher introduced the observer to the students on the observation day. The teacher was informed that it was the students who were the focus of the research and that the observer therefore would maintain a distance to the teacher. To obtain familiarity with the students, who had also received information that the focus was on them and their experiences, the observer remained in the classroom during all the breaks. After each observation session, however, the teacher was invited to look at and comment on the field notes with a view to ensuring continued access, trust and transparency. Both teachers and students also knew that the observer has a background as a teacher at a university college and in this regard has a particular familiarity as teacher in the field, which structurally counteracts the ambition of social proximity and familiarity with the students (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 610).

In order to emphasise the position as observer rather than teacher, the observer was sitting at the back of the room during observations. She made it visible that she was taking notes in a field book and thus tried to make the role as observer very visible. During the breaks and the group work, she moved around between the participants and asked a small number of

clarifying questions in the form of informal interviews. In this way, she wanted to signal openness regarding the participants' activities and considerations, as well as that the participants could approach her questions, also including questions about the research. However, the participants displayed limited interest through such questions; or they did not have the necessary confidence to raise them.

In terms of age, the students were distributed from their 30s to 50s, which is why the observer age wise fitted well into the group, while all the students' educational backgrounds varied from skilled to medium-length educations, to a few having studied at higher education level. With regard to level of education, the observer had also studied at a higher education level. Based on the following examples of observations from the classrooms, group work, and breaks we analyse the positions, roles and relations between the researcher and researched.

Classroom observation

The study includes teaching forms such as presentations and more dialogue-based class teaching in the classroom. According to field notes, in these forms of teaching the participants are listening and are to a lesser extent actively participating. The observer has chosen the role of 'complete observer', and she describes the participants in the field notes based on the initial characteristics such as physical location in the room, gender, or name in the event that it is mentioned.

However, examples are also given in the field notes where the participants are carrying out activities unrelated to the teaching. The examples are chosen from several, and they clearly show what can happen in situations that are framed as teaching. The observer is 'non-participatory' (i.e., does not participate in the activities) but sits close to the informants and writes field notes. The following is an example of field notes:

> *The students also do other things: reading e-mails, working with other electronic*
>
> *materials, looking at their calendars and iPhones.*
>
> *The lesson starts again after a short break. Some students are following in the book (...).*
>
> *The five women I can see are taking notes. Another woman is looking at shoes in*
>
> *Magasin [a department store] on her laptop computer.*

It is mentioned three times in the field notes that '*Sofie is reading e-mails*'. Thus, the observer tends to view what is happening that contrasts with teaching, which is seen through the controlling eyes of a teacher.

Based on the design of the study the observer takes a role as 'non-participatory' with a high degree of distance. The observer is able to say that participants occasionally do things that cannot be considered as related to the current lesson. The participants opt in and out with regard to attention; the observer does not know the participants' motives for this. However, the observer takes a norm of what the students are expected to do in the teaching as her starting point. Thus, both field notes and the initial analysis are characterised by a familiarity with the education sector seen from the experienced teacher's perspective.

The analysis can lead to the interpretation that the participants have made a decision in relation to what is important for them and the responsibility they will accept in the given teaching situation. In this way, the observations can indicate something about adults in education and provide a theory-based explanation, ascribing adults' particular qualities as learners (Illeris, 2015). However, such an interpretation represents a clear limitation in relation to an insider perspective of the students and thus, to the contribution of the complete observer in terms of ethnography. An ethnographic understanding would rather seek to reduce

as much as possible the symbolic violence exerted through the social structures of this situation (Bourdieu, 1999 p. 609).

Group work observation

In the field notes, there are several examples of group work. The groups' work appears to be different: At times, it is difficult for the students to get started; at times, they divide the work in the group; and, at other times, they discuss texts from the teaching. In some group work, the students spend time explaining to each other about their subjects and students at the vocational colleges. In the field notes, it is apparent how differently the groups work with the same task, which is elaborated below.

The observer moves around between the groups, and thus she gains a sporadic insight into the group work, of which two groups are interesting to this analysis. For one of the groups, the observer asks about what the group is doing, and the field notes show how the participants verbally express their experiences:

> *They explain that it is difficult to be completely new on the module (...), they lack Module 1 (...) and cannot completely keep up with the concepts. They are also in doubt about how they should look [at the educations they are teaching on] (...). They are unsure about what they have to do for the examination.*

Their doubts as to the forthcoming examination demands show that the course context is indeed framed by educational structures that put a strain on the students, even if the frames are apparently weakened by group work. In another group, the observer does not intervene in the group work, and field notes are both recording and reproducing the observer's considerations in relation to what is happening in the group:

> *They are talking about their own experiences about credit (...). I do not completely find out what they are working on. They are talking a little about drop-out rates.*

In the reproduced field notes, the observer is 'observer-as-participant' and 'complete observer', respectively. At first, the observations are characterised by distance, but in spite of this the informants in the first group provide access to their experiences: '*it is difficult*', '*doubt about*', and '*unsure about*'. On the one hand, this expresses a trust towards the observer, which on the other hand can also be seen as the feedback students can give to teachers when they do not experience the framing for the lesson as sufficiently clear. In the other group, the field note explicitly states the observation on a distance, which does not allow an understanding of the students' work.

Break observation

The last example from the vocational teacher training course takes place during a lunch break where several students as well as the observer are still in the classroom. The central informant is Uffe, who also participates in two focus group interviews. From these, the observer knows background information such as educational background, age, and work experience, and likewise the significance of the course in Uffe's private life. In addition, Uffe is also observed in his own teaching at a vocational college, where the observer has been given access to both his academic dissemination, understanding of a particular subject knowledge on a specific vocational education, as well as his pedagogy and relationships with vocational college students.

The situation is that Uffe, during the lunch break, gets up and starts writing on the board. In the meantime, several students work on solving the task that was set before the break:

> *I sit and wonder what is happening now. Uffe uses the pen at the board. He plays with praise for the other students. They discuss a sentence. Several students contribute during the break, and when the teacher comes in, the students continue working in different ways.*

The field notes show how the observer at first has difficulty understanding what is happening. However, it also appears in the notes that the observer has an assumption about how the situation can be understood: '*I consider whether I am watching disobedient adults*', and steps are taken to analyse the mood and understanding of the event in the notes: '*profound irony from Uffe*' and '*He plays with praise for the other students*'. The observer uses an occasion that occurs a little later in the day outside the classroom to ask Uffe what is happening. Uffe explains briefly that he and a colleague are deeply dissatisfied and frustrated with the teaching, and therefore they themselves are trying to take charge. The role and relationship between observer and informant thus gains a character where the informant's supplementary information is central for an understanding. As demonstrated by this relationship of trust between them, the role changes from 'complete observer' to 'participant-as-observer'.

As described above, the observed teacher gets an opportunity to read the field notes from her teaching. The students are not explicitly informed about this opportunity except in one case as will be explained later. Likewise, Uffe had been given the opportunity to read field notes from observations in his teaching at a vocational college, which the researcher had found necessary in order to getting access to the classrooms. On basis of the information allowed by this design, the teacher explains that Uffe and a colleague met up at the teacher's office after the lesson to explain and apologise for their behaviour during the break. The observer's access to this information casts further light on the situation, which can now be understood as though Uffe and the colleague had found themselves to be crossing a line with regard to good

behaviour as students. Thus, we gain access to further knowledge by communicating about field notes. The ethical aspect of this however can be problematized, as the sharing of such information can be seen as betraying the confidence obtained by familiarising with the informants.

What starts as a distance in recording field notes changes to a situation where the observer alternates between allying herself with both teachers and students. Therefore, both teacher and student as participants were asked and had given their acceptances to allow that analyses of this situation could be published. It is however questionable if informants in this way should be made responsible for ethically delicate parts of the research process by allowing them to exert censorship over the parts of observation material. It presupposes that the informants are informed and aware of the full consequences of their actions and the reading of it, which is also questionable (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1996).

An objectification of these relationships would require that the observer creates analytical distance to the field and involves theoretical perspectives towards the observed or e.g. invites other positional views to contribute to an analysis of the situation. As illustrated by the above example, maintaining familiarity with both sides of the field – the teacher and students – constitutes an ethical problem and contains the danger of not contributing with knowledge that extends beyond the field's own logic (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1996).

The course for gymnasium teachers – marked by relative informality and 'familiarity'

The field study of the course for teachers at the gymnasium has the same focus as the study described above and is carried out by the same observer. In the first instance, gatekeepers are the responsible head of the course, then teachers on the individual classes, and, lastly, the students. The fieldwork is carried out over a number of months in the spring of 2017 – that is,

parallel with the above-mentioned fieldwork. The extent of it is however significantly less, which is central for the roles and relationships that are built, and thus for familiarity and distance.

The course consists of several modules. Two modules that all students take are observed, where one of the modules is run as a day course at a hotel and the other as a boarding course at a different hotel. As a part of all the subjects at gymnasiums, there are didactic modules, and three of these modules are chosen that run as boarding courses at different hotels. The students take subject-didactic modules aimed at their subjects (e.g., Danish, Social Studies, or Mathematics). Boarding courses lead to a more participatory position and opportunity for contact with the participants, for instance, during mealtimes. Breakfast is very informal and takes place over an extended period. Lunch and dinner are more organised in terms of timing and formalities, but people are still seated together around tables and have conversations.

With regard to age, the observer is different to the participants, who in the vast majority are younger. With regard to education and work experience, there is a greater convergence than in the first study, since both parties have a university education and experience with teaching in the gymnasium. The common educational background appears to play a role, for instance, when the observer presents her research interest as sociological and talks about her methodological approach, since informants later pose questions about the design and theoretical approach. In the same way as in the above-mentioned study, the observer has made an agreement about access for observations with teachers, whose joint head of studies has informed the students. Likewise, teachers are informed that the students are the focus. All in all, the conditions for access resemble those on the vocational teacher training course.

During the teaching, the observer takes field notes on a laptop computer, and she writes the notes in full in the situation. The same applies to observations from breaks and activities such as group work and lectures that occasionally occur in other rooms. Thereby, the observer seeks to clearly indicate her role as an observer. During or at the end of the module, selected informants are invited to focus group interviews. The observer's knowledge of individual participants is much less than in the first study due to the shorter duration of the fieldwork. Fewer interviews are carried out, and on the whole individual participants are not followed as systematically. Some informants ask about the research in more informal situations at mealtimes and breaks, where the participants also add and elaborate information. The informants, both teachers and students, know that the observer has previously studied the education and has taught on it. This gives the observer a special kind of insider position, of familiarity to the field – though not with the participants.

Classroom observation

In the classroom, teaching methods such as presentations and dialogue-based situations are used, but lectures are more widespread than in the previous study. Also, on the course for teachers at the gymnasium, the students do different activities that do not directly relate to the teaching:

> *They are sitting in long rows in the room. The man in front of me is watching a live cycling race on the screen. He looks like he's following closely, clicks back to DR's [national media channel] homepage. The teacher talks about 'bildung': Another student is on an upper secondary school's homepage. Some are taking notes, a few are reading e-mails and online news.*

In field notes from both contexts, the observer acts as an insider in the way that she has insider knowledge about what teaching is with the risk of being implicit about it. In this way,

an insider knowledge occurs around the educational conditions that make up a part of the observer's own culture (Delamont, 2008, p. 42). However, field notes are more explicit with regard to describing the ongoing activities and do not, as in the first context, begin by defining the activity as teaching and not teaching. The explicitness of field notes illustrate attempts to objectify her insider knowledge as a teacher, while in the field.

It is also noted that '*A student asks during the break if I'm sitting and observing now.*' This is an indication that the informant relates to both his/her own and the observer's role. Thereby, it is clearer than in the first study how the observer, just by her presence, influences the field. Hence, in this example, it is more obvious that classifying the observer's role in classroom teaching as complete observer is not relevant. Then there is the question of analysing and interpreting the observation, which also calls for critical reflection as to the researcher's insider position as teacher.

Group work observation

The following example is based on the research interest in understanding the educational context through a relatively short-term ethnographic period with a lot of participants that the observer has no prior knowledge of or relationship with. The students therefore appear in the field notes as relatively anonymous, as they cannot be identified or named, while the relationship with two teachers involves greater familiarity. The starting point is a group work session that takes place at the end of the afternoon on the course for teachers, where during the day the teaching method has switched between presentations and different forms of activity. The observer experiences a sense of tiredness. This is partly due to her own physical experience of the day and partly because in some groups there is only one participant working on the poster that is the final task. The observer listens to two teachers talk about their experience of the task:

> *The teachers, who each have their own group, are standing and talking about this exercise being difficult to finish off. One of them says that his group has started 'anti-learning'. They talk about the students not having experiences with teamwork, which makes the task difficult.*

In the example, the teachers apply a form of professional interpretation of the situation, where they use their professional vocabulary, '*anti-learning*'. Here, the observer ascribes the experience of tiredness as a physical phenomenon greater significance. The observer also assesses that the participants partly fulfil their role as students by working towards the end product, but in such a way that not everyone participates in the task. Reflecting on this, we assume that the observer is influenced by a convention in education that all students should participate actively in the planned activities.

Even though there is no apparent relationship between the observer and informants in this situation, the opportunity to listen to the teachers and the physical experience of tiredness associated with being present during the whole course day gives access to their interpretations of the situation. Noting the teachers' considerations, which are based on the didactics and educational thinking and cause them to interpret the students' behaviour as 'anti-learning' in correspondence with an influential Danish view of learning as participation (Illeris, 2015), underlines an insider position aligned with the teacher. Here, the observer could have actively chosen to ask about the students' choice of participation forms. In this context of group work this could have occurred without breaking conventions as in the previous example of classroom teaching where the participation form for an observer is expectedly more passive.

Break observation

The next example is from an informal situation during breakfast on a different boarding course but in the same educational context.

Breakfast 7.30 am, some students are sitting at the same table as yesterday. One student asks what I mean by socialisation, which gets a discussion going. (...) Another student mentions that socialisation in the practical part of the course for gymnasium teachers is interesting. Other students tell about roles and relationships, and what they have the opportunity to want (...). A third student says that he has also taught himself to sit and look interested and nod a little, even though it is not interesting.

Here, the observer is a participant in the sense that she is eating together with the informants, which with regard to classification indicates the student perspective. The role as 'observer as participant' gives rise to a discussion with students about the course, which provides an insight into how they relate to their own situation as teachers at their gymnasiums. It also provides access to a possible explanation of how their attitudes as students on a boarding course can be understood.

As also appears in the quote, one student asks explicitly about the observer's explanation to the class as to her objective of the research. It is the observer's use of the academic term '*socialisation*' that leads to the question. The student's interest can be interpreted in several ways, and such uncertainties are, according to Gold (1958), present with the 'observer-as-participant', where the brief field relationship often entails a lack of clarification. One possible interpretation is that the student is unsure of the role as informant and does not experience himself as being informed. However, since the students, both as it appears in the quote and on other occasions, talk about challenges in the course for gymnasium teachers when the observer is present, they rather offer ongoing information that is relevant to the research project. Another possible interpretation is that the students are interested and knowledgeable; they know the concept socialisation and they both want to hear more and contribute with information relevant to the research. This interpretation is supported by the

last sentence in the quote, where the student talks about his own behaviour on the course as 'looking interesting and nodding even though it is not interesting'. Overall, the quote makes the students appear academically engaged, but they also express themselves as having other interests than the academic activities.

The last sentence, based on observations from an 'observer as participant' role, proves to be very complex as to assess how adults really relate to the teaching. It is only through the very informal situation of eating breakfast that access to this knowledge is given. The conversation could however also be interpreted as the student working on a certain self-presentation (Goffman, 1959).

Comparison, conclusion and discussion

Through a comparison of the two studies, there are some methodological similarities and differences that we will briefly summarise. Common to the studies is the clear marking of the role as observer through the ongoing writing of field notes, although they differ significantly on their terms of engagement which we will return to. In observations from the vocational teacher training course, the observer is in the same age-group as the informants. In the other course, she is older than most of the informants from gymnasiums, while she has the same educational level as this group of informants. She also fits well in the span amongst the educational backgrounds for teachers at vocational educations.

The initial assumption that the fieldwork on this type of adult education is characterised by specific conditions related to the fact that the courses give access to jobs as teachers has constituted an underlying focus of analysis. When the adults as students do other things than those related to teaching and thus to some extent seem unengaged in their own learning, they

might work on an appearance as interested in the observations without us being able to ascertain whether this is a construction facilitated by the role as informant.

It has been alleged (Gold, 1958) that informants in informal interviews express frustration or dissatisfaction, which is not directly revealed in observations with the position as complete observer. The more participatory observer positions, where different forms of familiarity are obtained, allow for different information and possible interpretations in relation to how adults adapt to an education course that is obligatory with regard to job functions (Gold, 1958). Our analyses suggest that the balance between familiarity and distance in the fieldwork must be continually discussed through critical reflections on the different positions and situations and an ongoing participant objectification of these. As stated by Golds categorisation, each position in the fieldwork raises possibilities and uncertainties when interpreting the data.

Objectifying the scientific subject proved an even more complex process, when it came to the more specific relations between researcher, teachers and students. Such relations can develop during time and prove very difficult to handle in ethically correct ways, e.g. in giving access to field notes while in the field. On the one hand, they provide an access to further information; on the other hand, familiarity obtained in this way raises ethical questions due to the risk of violating confidentiality. In the analysis, this was dealt with in the examples of giving informants access to field notes. While such access could add further perspectives to the field, it also shows the need to ensure that participants are fully informed about such procedures surrounding it – to the extent that this is possible.

Involving the participants directly in the research process by giving them access to field notes or asking for permission to publish results, opens for a discussion about radical doubts. In this fieldwork the doubts resulted in the researcher going back to the informants asking for

permission to publish results, which again can be questioned as to partly creating dilemmas of loyalty for them and partly expecting from them to rationally calculate all possible consequences of this.

The analysis indicates that educational background plays an important role for familiarity between the observer and informant, which is also supported by other studies (Jachyra et al., 2015). In the fieldwork, where educational level among all informants and the observer is identical, informants ask about the concept of socialisation, which is associated with the researcher's theoretical interest (Jansson & Nikolaidou, 2013). It is also remarkable in this fieldwork that informants are explicitly aware that they are observed. This finding gives rise to considering whether it is familiarity in the form of educational backgrounds or in general having a higher education that increases the awareness of being an informant.

The findings do not show in the same way that familiarity in relation to age is particularly important. However, it may also be that the fact of belonging to the same age group and being a teacher makes it possible for the observer to have the opportunity to have a role as complete observer. All in all, the findings draw attention towards the possibility of background factors playing a role in teacher educations.

The different situations in the fieldwork – observations of classroom teaching, group work, and more informal situations during breaks – show opportunities for different positions both for the observer and for informants. There are some conventions regarding the classroom that enable distance, but informal situations and conversations contribute with information that can complement and qualify observations based on a position as 'complete observer' and contribute to new understandings of the field (Bourdieu, 1999). Such information can be gathered by considering positions that are more participatory, whether it is observer-as-

participant or participant-as-observer (Gold, 1958). In the fieldwork analyses, there is variation in relation to whether the observer directly asks for some information or – what appears to the observer as more coincidental – that an informant provide information that the observer had not considered asking for. As far as we can see, this directs attention to the complexity of roles and relationships in fieldwork and that not everything can be prepared in advance.

Finally, the analyses show that when one as an observer has experience as a teacher, then this is significant in relation to what one considers as conventions for students' behaviour, which necessitates a break with such pre-assumptions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1996). Likewise, this is significant in relation to discussing access to the field, where communication via access to field notes may create a familiarity (Lefstein, 2010), but should also be pointed out as ethically questionable. Thus, it is not clear-cut whether the familiarity that observers have achieved through experience as teachers qualifies them for the role as a fieldworker on educations. However, it must always be something to be subject to a critical reflexivity (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1996), where reflexive analyses in cooperation with a fellow researcher can prove helpful.

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