

Exploring some ethical dilemmas and obligations of the ethnographer

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This paper focuses on the ethical position of the ethnographer when encountering unethical activities. Ethnography affords a rich insight into cultures, often behind previously secure doors but it is also a demanding science. Our gatekeepers control our access and our relationships with them can determine our destiny. This paper offers an exchange with ethics and the conditions experienced during an ethnography that challenged and disturbed this researcher's understanding of its rules and expectations. By drawing on data and experiences from a classroom ethnography it aims to consider the limits of ethics and the generic ritual that regardless of cost we must do no harm to others.

Keywords: ethnography; ethics; education; technology; cultures; classroom

This paper started out as being purposefully informative; we write to give information that may be of some use, or interest to others. As Tierney succinctly states: 'writing matters' (2002, 429). We revert to writing and the power of textual language in times of questioning, as an attempt to resolve any uncertainties we may have. 'Writing forces a space. Between words and things or thoughts they signify, and between those other metaphysical oppositions – truth and falsehood, self and other...' (Maclure 2003, 165). 'Writing heightens consciousness' (Ong 2002, 81); it is an evolving, reflective process. During the inception of this paper when I questioned my need to write, 'the effectivity of putting it into writing' (Applebaum 2009, 5), and the need to release my thoughts and questions, I came to realise that I was also writing for myself. I needed to write to try and understand myself and my reflexive and ethical positioning within my research and my professionalism. What became apparent during this internalised dialogue was that my ethical reflexivity – my ethical values and principles and the implications of my research towards those that I encountered in the field – for the *now*, and for the future, was not only being shaped by my past but also by my encounters 'in the field' (Reed-Danahay 2002).

In what follows in this paper I engage with theory and data from an educational ethnography as a means to explore the ethical challenges and dilemmas I experienced. What occurred during the ethnography was an unplanned and particularly sensitive turn where I found myself asking unexpected ethical questions about what I was observing and what I was hearing during interviews. These were questions that challenged my own positionality within the ethnography itself, which was emerging as a much more critical project than had originally been anticipated.

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Starting out

My journey as an ethnographer started in an environment that I was already familiar with, which allowed me to settle comfortably into my role as a participant observer in the digitalised classrooms of a further education (FE) college in the North of England. The college was typical of a small rural college, with its main campus located in a market town and two smaller satellite sites in nearby towns. During the research I was situated at both the main campus and one of the smaller sites, some six miles away. The research proposal had been approved by the university supporting me. It had also been discussed and access negotiated with the college, firstly at managerial level and then with individual lecturers and student cohorts. As I worked at the college, I already knew the lecturers on both sites who were to allow me into their classrooms; they were from other departments but colleagues of similar professional status, friends even, with whom I had occasionally shared jokes and drank coffee. The students were mostly familiar to me, due to a small number of their modules being shared across the departments. As such – as an ‘insider’ – the formalities of consent were eased through with all involved being very supportive. I had agreed with the lecturers and students that in my role as a participant observer I would ‘pay my way’ by supporting the students with note taking and proofreading, when needed. Under these conditions, it would have been unthinkable not to automatically and reflexively shake off as much familiarity as I could (Delamont and Atkinson 1995) for the year of study. I would become a nomad of fixed circuits operating between sites and rooms, hoping to lose myself yet be fully present (Solnit 2006); to see this environment anew. My aim was to study how new media, new digital technologies and socio-digital technologies were affecting (1) teaching and learning; (2) students’ approaches to their work; and (3) academic literacies in those classrooms that were rich in technology, especially the ubiquitous computer. Importantly to the research, these technologies are also treated as cultural artefacts. In other words, they are objects that mirror the subject (Baudrillard 1988); they become embedded in different cultures in different ways (Ihde 2008) and consequently, they enter our discourse as commodities saturated with socio-cultural use-value (Willis 2003).

Further education (FE) as a sector of education

It is important to situate the ethnography, as FE in particular within the sector of post-compulsory education in Great Britain, has been subject to a hyperactivity of policy and funding changes (Coffield and Edward 2009; Jephcote, Salisbury, and Rees 2008) as it attempts to be ‘this *and* that’ to all interests and initiatives. ‘AND is of course diversity, multiplicity, the destruction of identities’ (Deleuze 1995, 44, original emphasis). The range of students that enter FE can be equally diverse in nature and commitment (see, for example, Coffield et al. 2007). Working within this environment, FE lecturers become discursively shaped through the expectations placed upon them to balance their administrative tasks, along with the educational needs of their students (Edward et al. 2007) and a continual drive towards improving performance targets (Coffield and Edward 2009). Under such conditions technologies can be shaped according to use-value where, ‘value is used in recognition of the

ordinary incommensurables that people face in daily life and helps transcend such radical oppositions' (Miller 2008, 1124).

Classrooms as educational and cultural spaces

During the research it became apparent that the accessibility of the dominant classroom technology – the computer, and also personal mobile phones – afforded some lecturers the opportunity for a distraction, or respite, from the demands of students' educational needs. These new technologies allowed an escape from the space of the classroom into more personal, socio-cultural spaces. The dedicated staff computer in each classroom also afforded the lecturers a means to sustain administrative workloads, tasks usually reserved for the contracted non-teaching periods of time set aside for such duties. These divisions of self are by no means uncommon in society, in general, as social and spatial layers become multiple through the affordance of new technologies. These enable users to reach out digitally from one social space and context to another, regardless of location; for example, mobile phones with their multifunctional capacity for social contact or entertainment (Greenfield 2006; Ling 2008), or the internet and social networking websites. Students' concepts of social and academic spaces are equally as fluid, often to the detriment of their academic progress (Maltby and Mackie 2009; Rutter 2009). These shifting notions of spaces and priorities, from the discrete to the more multiple – afforded by the perpetual accessibility of technology-mediated communications – demonstrate that digital technologies have the capacity to mirror the needs and values of the user (Baudrillard 1988). The workload of the lecturer, under the weight of an audit culture (Hodkinson 2008; Sparkes 2007), can be just as easily relieved by a computer in a classroom as it can be in an office. As such, the digital classroom operating as a multiplicity of spaces both educational and socio-cultural is constantly being modified according to need and value; it is 'always under construction' (Massey 2005, 9).

For the ethnography it was important to observe the cultures and operations of the classrooms at their most natural, to go beyond the outward faces of education, those commonly displayed through the rhetoric of institutional promotions. These and other more academic performances, such as the internal and external quality inspections that take place where standards of professionalism towards teaching and learning are demonstrated and measured, emerge as more temporal, official shows for others; a form of presentation ritual (Goffman 1967), if you like. Formalised events, such as these function within specific boundaries and permit access to educational sites and its internal spaces at defined times. At other times, the boundaries shift and emerge as more mobile spatial fields (Munn 1996). The language of education becomes more a language of day-to-day pragmatism, functionality and of cultures that site the classroom, in particular, as a micro-space of negotiated heterotopias (Foucault 1986): those alternate non-official and cultural spaces that operate within the formal space of the classroom. *If we enter a classroom under these conditions, we go behind doors that are usually closed to observation and enquiry and as such, we are expected to understand the specificity and the tacit 'rules' of the place.* These are formative and translate towards an ethical relativism, one which is 'to fall silent' (Appiah 2005, 257) if what we encounter is not as it should be. Perhaps though, 'rules' conjures up typologies that are too categorical and too restrictive in our understanding of conduct. These expectations remain encircled by notions of responsibility

to those in the room that control its space; they are formed through a discursive and working knowledge of operating within such a site of education and shaped further by a more 'underground' understanding of the working conditions of FE. Here, a relentless culture of performativity (Ball 2003) and subsequent adoption of instrumental pedagogy and curricula (Simmons and Thompson 2008), determined by pervasive audit cultures (Hodkinson 2008), can condition the educator to more mechanical processes, which may restrain any inherent designer identity towards pedagogical innovation (Meng 2009). This is a pragmatic process, 'a marking-out of space that inhibits, rules out and marginalises alternatives' (Westwood 2003, 275); one which we may aim to understand more through the disruptive violence of research and theory, as challenging and reflexive tools (Ball 2006).

Any innocence of this ecology of education was no longer present, as I was just as much part of this system. But it was this alternate face that I wanted to understand as an ethnographer; the *other* face, the face 'through another language' (Trondman 2008, 121), where '[c]lassroom culture does not manifest itself as some pristine unity or disembodied entity but is, rather, discontinuous, murky, and productive of competition and conflict...' (McLaren 1999, 6).

The practices and the cultures of the classroom

The students involved in the research were all full-time, arts orientated and aged between 16 and 18 years old. Their courses were for two years and at the highest level for this age of student. As individuals, they could have remained at school to continue their education before progressing to university, or employment. However, they chose to leave that environment for what they considered to be the more adult and less formal world of a college. Importantly, they were expected to work with an aptitude for independence. In practice, many were not ready for this, either from a skills level or their need for a more structured and disciplined pedagogy. If there was no direct teaching taking place there was an expectation for lecturers to facilitate by circulating the classroom and monitoring progress, or to work with those students who were having difficulties and needed support, for whatever reason. The reality was that some would frequently use that time for administrative or other less academic tasks. The result would be that the students needing support, or those less engaged and even the more competent students, would drift and lose focus, often achieving little progress during a lesson:

John: They [classrooms] can be quite isolating as the teacher kind of isolates himself from the students [by sitting at the staff computer] and doesn't really go around as much as they should do. I mean me myself, I'm admitting this openly, I'm like constantly going on MySpace and YouTube and I get distracted from my work and I need that pressure to be there.

Despite the college's policy that there should always be a timetabled member of staff in a classroom, in a regular number of incidents the students would be left unsupervised. This could occur with the lecturer arriving late, either at the start of the morning, after a mid-session break or after lunch break. It could even happen during a session with the lecturer leaving the room, often without comment for an undetermined period:

Sherry: ... he comes in and then goes out which makes students not come in as well cos like they go, 'Well if I'm late Phil's not gonna care', kinda thing.

AB: Do you find then that affects your work?

Sherry: Well, if the teacher's out the room, you're not gonna do any work are you really. It's not the fact that you don't want to do work it's the fact the teacher's not there, so you feel like a rebel, you just can't do it.

Students were also frequently disturbed by one lecturer's lack of motivation and pedagogy:

Sophie: But with Ewan he's a different story because he doesn't give feedback... in the first year he said, 'Oh, to get passes' and I'm quoting him, he said, 'Sneeze on a bit of paper and put your name on it and that's a pass'.

Others expected much more contact and support than they received:

Megan: Yeah... it's just like when... like if you ask a tutor, especially Ewan, if you ask him he's like, 'Oh, ask someone else' –

Charlotte: Or, 'Use the internet' –

Megan: Yeah or, 'Do a tutorial [online]' –

Molly: Ewan just like just brushes you off (...) not really helping.

Oliver: Half the time he'd sit there and say, 'Oh you're asking for help' and he'd sit and tell you to look it up on the internet and –

Jack: Yeah, like he meant –

Lucy: Google it –

Jack: I know like college work you're meant to like take your own responsibility but this takes the piss.

One lecturer would regularly organise his social life in the classroom by using the available social software on the staff computer, or his mobile phone:

Oliver: His friends will call him –

Lucy: And you hear what he's going to do at the weekend. I mean, yeah a college isn't a school... it's, you kinda get a bit more leeway but you're still in a professional environment. You have to hold respect to keep it (...) to control your students.

Bob: No one at this college has respect for Ewan, even the first years.

This was not only a discrete activity, which occurred behind closed doors, but also one that intruded into the very acts of teaching:

Lucy: Sometimes it does really annoy me if like the tutor's just sat in the class on the phone laughing away, talking to their friends, it does bug me a lot. Or, if you like... if there's one of the tutors near the computer showing you something and then they get a phone call they say, 'Oh wait a minute' and get up and leave the room and talk for like ten minutes and then come back in...

Not all the lecturers would be so lacking in their professionalism and care for the students. During interviews the students would offer their approval for some by drawing on other lecturer's deficits:

Max: We're always waiting around for our work to get back to us, whereas if Pete's (...) if we've got a lesson with Pete and we're all busy doing something and we hand in work to him he'll mark it as soon as he's got a spare five minutes. He won't spend five minutes prattling around looking for music on the internet, or emailing his friend or (...) or, he won't go and get a coffee when he knows we're all like doing our work. He'll stay there, keep an eye on us, make sure we're all comfortable with what we're doing.

My own observations confirmed the students' frustration. Frequently, some lecturers would openly access their mobile phone for social contact by either responding to texts, or calls from friends, or by initiating contact. During one lesson a lecturer organised a car insurance quote using their mobile phone; there was no attempt made to disguise this event as they sat at a table facing the length of the classroom holding a clearly audible conversation with an insurance operative. The college had a strict policy against students using non-academic technologies in classrooms, although this was widely flaunted. If a student was caught then their online account could get suspended for up to a month. By observing some lecturers failing to set an example the students, despite the risks, sanctioned their own socio-cultural use of technologies within the classroom.

By observing events such as these once or twice you can perhaps place this as a slip, here and there, of professional practice. But, over the period of my research there was a sustained continuity to these practices. This was repeatedly confirmed through the periodic interviews and discussions with students over the year. At the early stages of the research observing some of these incidents was disturbing, as these were colleagues that I had held in professional regard, yet they occurred with such seeming normality that there was sometimes little register to them. It was this which became a warning sign for me as, 'we are therefore *deeply* embedded in our culture when we are at our most natural and spontaneous: if you like our most work-a-day' (Willis 1979, 186, original emphasis)

Many of these incidents were less blatant and the sheer volume of time that students spent working on computers become just as problematic to their progression. A frequent lack of evidence of any planning by some lecturers resulted in there being little structure to their lessons with students often told to carry on with work from a previous session. This lack of direction, structure or pedagogical variation was just as culpable towards demotivating students as any of the other incidents that are cited:

Sophie: I think, I think what that is, is (...) I mean I am guilty of using MySpace and Facebook and things like that during college times, but I think when you just get so incredibly mind numbingly bored of something (...) I think you're going to jump at the chance for a distraction, and I know that's ridiculous because you know in the industry you can't do that, but I think when you're just doing it literally day in day out for TWO years you will just get bored, and with us being on a computer we (...) everything we seem to do seems to revolve around it.

Lucy: Well in the first year, about like half the first year, I really enjoyed it but as it was getting on to the end I was getting a bit (...) not bored but every day sitting at a computer kind of does send people insane, and I, I like to be practical creating things up instead of SITTING in front of a computer.

The response to these conditions from the students were significant signs of academic procrastination as they lacked any enthusiasm for curriculum participation in this

environment; 'they escaped it without leaving it' (de Certeau 1984, xiii) by drawing on socio-digital technologies, as familiar cultural artefacts, in their time of need. The outcome of this was that many lowered their academic expectations, as they were not attaining the grades that they had been capable of. For many, their progression to university was to a lesser course than had been their original ambition:

Toby: I mean I've kind of ruled out (...) because I want to go to university next year I've actually kind of ruled out actually going for a BA. I've said I'm going to have to go for a foundation [degree] because I just know I won't get the points I need to get in.

Aaron: Yeah...and with the timescale I'm just aiming to get on to the foundation degree.

One of the dangers of ethnography is partisanship and 'going native' (Hammersley 2000). In my case, the lecturers were colleagues and the environment was familiar; yet I had also got to know the students well, even more so through the interviews and frequent casual discussions. What did disrupt any professional empathy to the conduct of some lecturers were the significant differences between lessons that were being observed for either internal or external quality inspections and those that were not. For those that did appear to neglect their professionalism to then offer a contrasting and more dynamic, 'expected' style of pedagogy in the presence of more official observers was a significant indicator that they were certainly aware of appropriate standards. This is not to advocate that the teaching demonstrations that take place under such conditions are necessarily models of good education in practice. Nor, as alluded to earlier, were all the lecturers that worked with these students negligent in their professionalism. The parameters between the two differed significantly with a number working late into the night at home or on their days off to maintain their responsibilities.

Unlike some workers who may lack the resources to resist the strategies of management (Lipsky 1980), the lecturers worked discretely within classrooms. If deviations from professional practice occurred during non-observed periods their only audience would normally be students and despite having a voice through a range of formal and informal outlets students' voices can be restrained and any concerns internalised, unless there is a significant incident. As an example, during the time of the research an incident occurred where a letter was anonymously sent to a manager complaining about the course and quality of teaching. The manager subsequently arrived unexpectedly at a lesson and asked the lecturer to leave the room so that they could discuss the contents of the letter privately with the students. After this visit the students, who had made their concerns apparent to the manager, expected some improvements to be made to their learning experience. However, as no apparent changes occurred and despite a denial of ownership towards the document, the students viewed raising any further grievances as unproductive and that their voices were not valued.

In education, deficit discourses towards the conditions of a learning environment can demonstrate an incongruity between lecturers' and students' perceptions, where the students focus on quality of teaching and lecturers cite poor student behaviour (Russell 2004). Significantly, these students did not demonstrate any of the poor behaviour or unpredictable and shifting dispositions to education and learning that

have previously been identified as characteristic amongst some FE students (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000a, 2000b). Anything that could be construed as untoward behaviour surfaced as a quiet procrastination towards their coursework:

Individuals do not move about in social space in a random way, partly because they are subject to the forces which structure this space... and partly because they resist the forces of the field... (Bourdieu 1984, 110)

As young students expecting greater direction and support with their education they responded to these deficits in a reciprocal way, which demonstrated that they were as much victims of elements of education as their relationship to the ubiquitous and polyvalent computer. The technologies of the digital classroom and those more socio-digital resources afforded this behaviour as practical objects, 'rooted in their material and symbolic base' (Nowotny 2006, 17). They were acted on in a way that is continually demonstrated in this digital age where, 'technologies have come to mediate human practices' (Veerbeek 2009, 241). As such, the students demonstrated those cultural and symbolic actions that constitute and form young people in this socio-digital age that we live in (Willis 1979, 2003). As young people, they insinuated into the constraining space of education a part of their own culture as an expression of their discomfort (de Certeau 1984).

The ethical challenge of coming across the unexpected

What disturbed and challenged my ethics as an ethnographer were those regular incidents of seemingly misguided interpretations of power and practice by a number of lecturers, as illustrated through the above examples. Perhaps, through my own naivety I had not anticipated this; after all these were colleagues that I had respected, and as they were so amenable to my presence in the classrooms why should I have doubted them. In encountering such conduct in the field how do we respond, especially when there is an existing professional relationship? Under such circumstances, do we intervene and approach those individuals as a well-minded colleague, however tentatively, to try and make sense of the situation? This strategy carries the risk of modifying our status and the potential loss of a gatekeeper's confidence in how we maintain our expected role. It also runs the risk of losing access, for ourselves and others that may wish to follow; or worse, it may even be career damaging (Besley and Peters 2007; Westmarland 2001). Such questions intrude into where we situate our discomfort and our ethics and are some of the personal and internalised costs that may be incurred in the doing of an ethnography (Wolcott 2008).

In a recent issue of this journal there is a recount of ethnographers deliberately intervening during their time in the field (Dennis 2009). This is a bold praxis, as the politics of intervention carry a weight of judgement with them. My dilemma was that at the time I was collecting data I was not that certain about what I should do and perhaps, selfishly, I worried about the risk to the continuity of the research that could result from any interventions on my part. On the topic of intervening, we can apply insights from Applebaum's (1995) work. He writes about the moment of the 'Stop', where past knowledge and experience are drawn on when considering the next step forward and the actions that may result from making this move (1995). That is the crux, that next step may be, 'one that breaks an onrushing momentum and opens

experience to another point view' (Applebaum 1995, ix); one that confronts an aversion and which we cannot retreat from – a deterministic one – and we make our decisions based on what we judge, in hope, will be the most valuable, or relevant, outcome. Except in those most inhumane of circumstances, if we avoid the extreme and potentially escalating action of whistle blowing (Westmarland 2001) do we intervene and approach those that are the perpetrators of misconduct?

If my interpretations of data were accurate to avoid confrontation yet identify this unprofessionalism in my research, however anonymously, could become tantamount to a betrayal of trust to my colleagues. After all, without their permissions the research would not have been able to take place. I was caught in a dilemma of being torn between disloyalty to colleagues and a moral obligation to those students who were receiving a less than ideal education. These considerations were compounded with the risk, aversion even, of losing access to this fertile research site. However, by avoiding these questions and remaining as a more passive observer I could aim to gain a clear, accurate and non-judgmental account of the cultures of the classroom and also remain within the original aims of the research. One consideration that I dwelled upon was: were these educators perpetrators of misconduct, or were they just as much victims of education, subjects formed by its politics and the expectations of a dystopic performativity? (Ball 2003). Albeit, demonstrating a misguided 'minor language' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) of resistance. Education is no innocent bystander towards symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) – one that is 'embodied in language' (Žižek 2008, 1) – as institutions and policy discursively form its subjects; who may indeed demonstrate such an agential resistance, however misguided, to the regimes that they are subjugated into (Hodkinson 2008). These considerations haunted me as to fail to record can be just as much a hostile act (Scheper-Hughes 1992): one of a denial of voice to those students who were the victims in these circumstances.

Approaching ethics and the Other

Caputo (1993) deconstructs philosophical ethics and as such the inherent support and guidance it offers, which 'clarifies concepts, secures judgements...[and]...throws a net of safety under the judgements we are forced to make' (Caputo 1993, 4) and offers an alternative: obligation. Caputo's notion is that obligation 'happens'; it confronts us as a prescriptive that we must always be open to, a call that can either be followed, or resisted:

It is of the utmost importance to be able to sort out among prescriptives, to tell the difference between prescriptives to follow and prescriptives to resist, to differentiate among prescriptives, which often conflict, e.g., or which often oblige us precisely to disobey them (Caputo 1993, 26)

By considering one's obligations, a researcher is placed in the situation of determining where such obligations are situated if there emerge any critical incidents, which challenge the original intent and direction of the research. Such questions form new and 'stuck places' (Lather 2007) which can be avoided by bracketing them away in order to remain within the original aims, and maintain a conservative ethic of doing no harm to others. Yet at what cost can we contemplate such an avoidance

of obligation – especially in my case – to those students who were clearly being disadvantaged? If we confront any existing aversions to adopting an interventional praxis and stop to consider our actions we could open our experience to another point of view (Applebaum 1995): one that is more critical and reflexive; one that contains risks of personal judgement, which may ultimately prove either correct, or misjudged. Taking risks can challenge ‘orthodoxies and taken-for-granted practices’ (Ball 2006, 1); it can unsettle the status quo and, at times, be necessary.

A discussion towards ethics and a reflective conclusion

The conditions that ethnography investigates are not always those conducive to moral behaviour (Duneier and Back 2006; Westmarland 2001), especially within the politically and socially rich environment of education where structural and more individualistic power ebbs and flows. However, when researchers do come upon unexpected misconduct then the ethics that are taken into the field must surely be questionable and open to revision and transformation. This is especially germane within education where a commitment to students’ education should be a basic and given premise – one which is reliant upon the maintenance of professional standards by the trained educator, as an individual and a member of an institution. Young people should be able to trust that their learning, skills and knowledge gain, which is a determinant towards their potential futures, is in able and willing hands. In this case, the lack of professionalism from some lecturers was reciprocated by a lack of engagement and motivation amongst the students (see, for example, Skinner and Belmont 1993). These may be the moments during research when we consider bracketing away any inexpressible data, and perhaps we need to view such instances as an opportunity to stop and consider our obligations. Using this case, who could act on the students’ behalf and talk their truth into power?

My first dilemma, my first *stop*, was encountering the lack of pedagogy from colleagues and moments like this can challenge the very presence and role of the researcher. When bad practice is so apparent how does one respond? Surprisingly, when ethnography is such a popular method for educational research, ethnographic recounts of less than ideal experiences of education which involves the practices of educators adversely affecting students’ behaviour and performance are rare, especially the rich ethnographic data that emerge from both interviews and first-hand observations (see, for example, Dennis 2009). Although, McNamee (2001) does approach this situation hypothetically with Tickle (2001) offering instances not involving students, but injustices to trainee and new teachers from other professionals in positions of power.

In my situation I decided to continue the research, recording the data but not intruding; although I was an ear to the students who perhaps gained some relief that another professional would listen to them. But did I fail them by not adopting a more active role in their situation? I could have added weight to their voice by offering my observational data to the manager who had visited the students – surprisingly, at the time, my opinion had not been sought – or, by approaching the lecturers to discuss possible changes to their behaviour, which was clearly disadvantaging the students. My second moment to *stop* was when my time for collecting data had ended; although I was not completely detached from the research

field, due to my professional associations. In this second *stop*, I chose to explore my dilemma through this paper with a new, more removed audience.

One possibility for ethics is analogised with Deleuze's comments towards the construction of a stone cairn if, in our minds we can imagine ethics as being 'composed somewhat like a cairn, with stones carried in by different voyagers' (Deleuze 1997, 66). Therefore, if we refrain from any opportunities to textualise, or otherwise export our thoughts and experiences – even if we do not enact upon them as individuals – then ethics, as such a cairn, will not extend its dimensions. As a result, we may be the lesser for not carrying our experiences towards that metaphorical cairn which, just as the stones and rocks we come across on our way help construct and extend it.

So why write these words, why disclose this to a wider audience? Duneier comments that ethnography can, 'change the world, but that we change it in subtle ways. We change it through bringing about awareness and understanding . . . we become part of the dialogue' (Duneier and Back 2006, 563). If ethnography plays a passive role – by this I refer to one where ethics and criticality remain conservative – then our reportage risks remaining an academic exercise. Risk incurs discomfort, it challenges not only our own positioning in the world and the conditions that we choose to inhabit, it can ontologically realign us and as individuals we can contribute to the momentum of change. We can sit back and record what we see and hear and bracket off any disturbing and uncomfortable data. But, not only may there then be a dilution of the research, we also risk discarding our ethical obligations to those whose truth needs disclosing through our commitment to them (Badiou 2002). Whether the ethnographer, as a critical social scientist, explores change through intervention (Dennis 2009), or through the capacity of awareness building is perhaps a discussion that will continue evolving. As such, this paper aims to augment and extend this scholarship.

On reflection and with a distance of almost two years, do I regret not intervening? Perhaps the students learned a somewhat displaced but valuable lesson that through it all they do need to take ownership and agency towards their learning and futures. Did they receive a more diminished experience of their education than they had expected and were surely entitled to? Without doubt, but all of them have moved on in their lives and most will have quite probably put it behind them. Or, perhaps they do carry it with them and in some ways are the wiser for it? As I write this I still have occasional contact with a number of these students, who have moved on to universities and although I avoid discussing these topics too much with them they do appear to be more in control of their futures if they encounter any new, less than ideal experiences of education. They now adopt a more pragmatic outlook as they occasionally conjoin the past and the present and briefly reflect on those earlier days.

One thing for sure is that ethnographers will continue to encounter situations where there is injustice and as Žižek provocatively comments, '[s]ometimes, doing nothing is the most violent thing to do' (2008, 183). How we project our voice to others may largely be due, not to any strength of conviction, but perhaps to the circumstances that we find ourselves in, which then determines the mode of our voice. If I had extended my findings, which ranged across sites and with a number of lecturers, to more senior college personnel then the continuity of the research would have been breached and this would have quite probably transformed the research into something other than what it sets out to be. From another standpoint, I would have

had to betray the trust of some of my gatekeepers who, despite their actions, welcomed me into their environment. Ellis (2007) acknowledges this dilemma of the fragmented self – friend and researcher – and the difficulties that can follow by placing friendship secondary to the research (see also, Ellis 1995).

The journey, from entering the research field to writing this paper, has been haunted by these unexpected ethical dilemmas and I still carry this with me, despite releasing these words. Perhaps, naively I had not considered the risk of how to cope with any potential situations where I would need to consider the ‘dirty hands’ of whistle blowing (McNamee 2001). Perhaps this was because the site was so familiar, as were the participants that these circumstances were not anticipated. Whistle blowing in itself is situated as a disruptive, no retreat act and one which is acknowledged as being located within educational ethnography (McNamee 2001). Yet, assessing if there is a need to resort to these actions raises complex questions in such a socially rich environment and this is certainly not a formulaic process. Ultimately, my priorities were with sustaining the momentum of the research, as the opportunity to spend so much time in the field, in this environment, was not likely to be repeated, especially with the timeliness of the original aims of the research to this generation of students’ level of engagement with new media and technologies.

As the students had already received an opportunity to voice their concerns with disappointingly no apparent response from management, would my voice have lent any weight to theirs? In such intimate surroundings perhaps we do need to take advantage of our access and relationships and tentatively approach those who appear to be adopting unethical acts by taking into the field a ‘broader conception of ethics’ (Dennis 2009, 133). As Ellis (2007) acknowledges the distances that time and experience offer can allow us to grow wiser.

There are a number of things I take from this research that remain with me and still trouble me. I knew the curricula well enough and I wonder what would have resulted if I had modified my status and taken a much more active, academic role in the classrooms and tried to motivate the students more towards their coursework. Perhaps their futures may have been stronger? Again, this would have moved the research into another direction and possibly made my presence too uncomfortable and threatening to the lecturers. Perhaps I should have negotiated this? All of these reflections and thoughts remain as scars and form the ‘breaks and jagged edges’ (Lather 1997, 300) of the ethnography. As commented by others, the purpose of ethnographic enquiry and ‘how researchers deal with ethical dilemmas ultimately comes down to personal choice, and the responsibility that goes with this...’ (Ferdinand et al. 2007, 540).

To end this paper, I am more convinced now through the technology of writing and through the places this essay has taken me to, that there are times when ethnography should be an endeavour to observe with a more critical and ethical ethnographic eye – one that also recognises an obligation to the Other. Not just ethnography as becoming more than a conservative act but also its texts: ‘an assemblage...the measure of something else. [Where] writing...has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 4–5). These would also serve as an anamnesis for the author–ethnographer during the act of writing and perhaps others whilst reading. A reconstruction and discussion of those competing and at times, contradictory obligations and duties could take us

into other spaces and places where we need to bear the weight of the question of truth(s) and squarely confront our journeys (Steigler 2009).

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