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# Together apart: field notes as artefacts of collaborative ethnography

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## ABSTRACT

This article is drawn from the authors' first experience as school ethnographers who gathered data on eleven- and twelve-year old children in a Moscow school. The focus is on data processing in ethnographic writing. The paper addresses the challenges of making field notes in a collective consisting of researchers with different professional and personal backgrounds. Based on the theories of digitally mediated communication and the accounts of qualitative research as assemblage it examines how collaboration emerges through joint electronic creation of ethnographic field notes. The notion of artefact stemming from theories of computer-aided communication comprises the nature of field notes as complex objects, documenting both the field and the process of collaborative writing. Examples of artefacts and respective reporting strategies are provided. The authors conclude with a discussion of sequences of their approach for further development of the practices of digitally mediated collaborative writing in ethnography.

## KEYWORDS

Collaborative writing; field notes; artefacts; digital communication; validity

## Introduction

Academic research is undergoing significant changes associated with increasing pressure for collaboration (Duysburgh et al. 2012). Recent ethnographic literature has followed this trend, revealing greater awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of collaborative work (Belgrave and Smith 1995; Gallagher and Freeman 2011; Phillips et al. 2013; Clerke and Hopwood 2014). The nature of collaboration largely swings between an emphasis on public engagement (Lassiter 2005) and the analysis of teamwork (Erickson and Stull 1998). The latter often highlights the sensitivity to the professional mores and practices of relatively inexperienced fieldworkers with different personal and educational backgrounds (Bufford May and Pattillo-McCoy 2000; Carroll and Jessica 2011; Clerke and Hopwood 2014). However, most accounts stress that the job of gathering data and recording field notes is done by each team member separately (Bufford May and Pattillo-McCoy 2000; Carroll and Jessica 2011; Clerke and Hopwood 2014). In this paper, we re-examine the implicit conjunction of allegedly individual observation and note-taking. Our focus is on collaborative data processing in ethnography. More specifically we present how

collaboration emerges while data are travelling from the field (what was seen) to the field notes (what and how was written down).

This article is drawn from our first experience as school ethnographers who gathered data on eleven- and twelve-year old children in a Moscow school. Our observations were a part of *Early adolescence project* initiated by Childhood Research Center at the Institute of Education of the Higher School of Economics and carried on in 2016. The project was inspired by a research accomplished in the late 1960s by a group of Soviet psychologists (El'konin and Tatyana 1967). Back then researchers sought for the emergence of the sense of adulthood through classroom observation of children's behaviour. Their study was an attempt to ground empirically existing theories of childhood and resulted in a vast amount of data considering socialist childhood. However, El'konin and Tatyana (1967) never used the term 'ethnography' which was and still is strongly limited to the study of indigenous people in the Russian context (Anderson and Arzyutov 2016).

Thus, *Early adolescence project* was a pioneering attempt to introduce a state-of-the-art notion of school ethnography into Russian education studies currently lacking any sustained ethnographic tradition, in order to embrace the common methodological core of the approaches of the large multidisciplinary team. The project attempted to study the impact of the school environment on the coming-of-age process of contemporary Russian early teens and to compare the newly researched evidence with the findings of Soviet psychologists in order to better understand whether and how the school environment, and children's behaviour in it, adjusted to the greater social transformation. Our endeavour represents two basic trends regarding the emerging field of education ethnography in Russia. First, fieldwork goes hand in hand with theoretical recognition of researcher's own subjectivity silenced by positivist accounts of ethnographic work among indigenous people (Anderson and Arzyutov 2016) as well as by Soviet developmental psychologists (El'konin and Tatyana 1967). Second, the use of digital devices and technologies for mediating research needs appears as a proxy for triggering common methodological concern across diverse domains of professional expertise.

The historical dimension of the *Early adolescence project*, along with methodological challenge, entailed the extension of the team beyond the perceived group of professional psychologists to include two sociologists, a historian and a social work specialist. Continuity in the structure of the Russian secondary education system made the whole case plausible. Despite the collapse of the USSR, the age of school entry and the number of school attainment years remained relatively unchanged. As in the 1960s, Russian children now mostly enter school around six or seven years old. In the mid-1980s a fourth year was added to the primary level, raising the overall length of school attainment from ten to eleven years. A vast majority of children attend public municipally funded schools. Federal standards provide the uniformity of the curriculum across the country. In contrast to the apparent continuity in the education system, we could not follow the methodological guidelines of our predecessors. Soviet psychologists of the 1960s paid little, if any, attention to the explicit layout of their general methodology and specific observational and writing strategies. Apparently, they were clinging to the once-influential model of naturalistic observation (Duveen 2000; Sparling and Chong 2011) which presumes no specific sensitive to data processing.

Ethnographers, in contrast, have long been aware of challenges related to making records of their observations (Sanjek 1990; Walford 2009b). That provides another

reason for choosing ethnography as an umbrella term for our multidisciplinary research. Yet probably the most influential collection in the field was built on a single researcher case of the pre-digital age (Clifford and Marcus 1986). A discussion of ethnographic collaboration, apart from the community engagement perspective, concentrates on the interplay of personal biographical accounts, along with the influence of individual subjectivities on research outputs (Bufford May and Pattillo-McCoy 2000; Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, and Kemmer 2001; Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang 2010; Carroll and Jessica 2011). When it comes to the process of writing, researchers appear to hold a somewhat linear view of progressive transition, from individual handwritten field notes, to separate follow-up records, to collective (or individual) crafting of paper drafts and final academic products (Sanjek 1990; Walford 2009b; Clerke and Hopwood 2014; Coles and Thomson 2016). Digitalisation of ethnographic work was previously examined in the context of a multi-sited project (Gallagher and Freeman 2011). Although our project was accomplished in a single setting, we also struggled to maintain effective, digitally mediated communication among team members. For instance, some peers used to make field notes on their laptops from scratch. The way of keeping records, as well as sharing them, in joint Google Doc format, influenced individual styles of writing notes as the project progressed. In what follows, we would like to examine how digitally mediated communication transforms note-making as an intrinsic part of ethnographic activity.

## Methodology and research design

The project team comprised eleven members of different age, gender and professional background including sociology, psychology, history, and social work. Observation sessions took place three times per week for twelve weeks; from 8am until about 3pm depending on the number of classes, February till May 2016, excluding two breaks about ten days each, for school vacations. Weekly face-to-face debriefings were held by the team from December 2015 to December 2016 to discuss theories of childhood development field work and preliminary findings. Throughout the meetings, we often paid special attention to the effects of multidisciplinary on individual research angles and techniques. This dialogical setting had a direct impact on the design of observational sessions. Most were conducted by two observers making notes separately, in longhand or electronically during the classes, discussing observations in the breaks and then merging them at the end of the day. The resulting records were then added into the joint project Google Doc, where they were often further extended due to the feedback and questions from other peers. About five hundred and forty hours of observation were accomplished by the team *in toto* and more than two hundred pages of typed notes of standard A4 format were produced in general for the joint electronic log. The project received ethical clearance from the Institutional Review Board of the Higher School of Economics. We communicated the project description to the school headmaster and teachers of the chosen class in advance. Informed consent was obtained from all children involved in observational sessions as well as their parents. All childrens' names mentioned in the paper are pseudonyms. The authors of the present paper are the only members of the initial team that took part in all stages of the research process from preparation to producing final reports and academic papers. Since our focus is firmly on the practices of collaboration, we

would not here report on the project's findings presented elsewhere (Polivanova, Bocharov, and Nisskaya 2017).

Concerns were raised regarding time-compressed ethnography because it might overlook temporal patterns of the site (Hammersley 2006; Walford 2009a). However, time pressures also prevent exclusive reliance on observation as a data source. Our research involved interviews with students and teachers, collecting quantitative information on academic achievements, taking photos and making drawings of the school environment. A highly ordered nature of the school environment is obvious from the observations. For researcher operating in such an environment it is tempting to suppose achieving a clear understanding of the site in a relatively short period of time (cf. Brockmann 2011). Conducting ethnography in a team prevents any field worker from positioning their own angle as unique while providing all team members with a relevant sense of 'liveness' (Gallagher and Freeman 2011). When field work must be accomplished within a limited time frame, constant sharing is the only means to provide rigorous research. Moreover, rotation of team members conducting observations, within any given week of field work, makes all observers especially sensitive toward spatial and temporal changes when they returned to the school environment for another session. Not to diminish the value of lengthier site visits, we would like to emphasise that the condensed time frame of the project stimulated our resolution to use digitally mediated collaborative writing. The reality of the distributed teamwork prompted us to abandon linear vision of the research process. We were inspired by the idea of assemblage, stemming from interacting lines of thought and writing (Augustine 2014).

## Theoretical framework

There is a growing strain of literature on the 'messiness' of collaborative work in ethnography (Carroll and Jessica 2011; Lewin and Reeves 2011; Clerke and Hopwood 2014). Unstandardised, *ad hoc* decisions are made by professionals across various fields quite often in order to move the flow of communication. Keeping ethnographic records, a problematic activity for a solo researcher, is a rather uneven job as a collaborative practice. Due to the differences of experience, personal backgrounds and skills, it is full of asymmetries, i.e. discrepancies regarding appropriate ways to accomplish research procedures (Clerke and Hopwood 2014). The inequality of academic statuses also contributes to the divide of visions of fieldwork along power lines (Phillips et al. 2013). Therefore, any collection of field notes stemming from collaborative work presents a twofold documentation of the field and of the research team. As an electronic or physical object, it effectively delivers the sense of individual practices entangled together in the process of collaboration. Joint log provides material testimony of how subjective researchers' visions supplement each other (Bufford May and Pattillo-McCoy 2000; Carroll and Jessica 2011; Clerke and Hopwood 2014). Moreover, it is a guide to collaboration history where all decisions taken might be tracked down to their first appearance. Open writing supported team communication through better transparency of individual observational strategies and subsequent restructuring of further data processing. While reading collegial notes team members reacted by editing their own records adding more extensive textual comments, inserting photos and sketches. Coles and Thomson (2016) recently provided a sound analysis of shadowed moments of writing in-between field-notes and the final paper.

We would like to extend the concept of in-betweenness to cover the effects emerging out of the practice of making one's own field notes almost immediately available to colleagues. Researcher's capabilities to adapt across specific contexts and situations are enhanced and sensitised by the peer's reactions. Sharing of notes accelerated by common electronic log was obviously transforming individual styles of observation and writing as the project progressed. One might object that it is exactly the reason to keep individual field notes separately. However, individual researcher constantly reacts to material environment, other persons, one's own physical condition etc. Personal notes are no less an assemblage of various agential forces than collaborative products are (Augustine 2014). Yet in case of field notes that are kept by a team as intermediary artefacts of collaboration this heterogeneity is inevitably made transparent and reflexively accountable from the scratch. Exposition of personal working habits and environment to peers is a psychological challenge as such (Ruth 2016). Still enactment of exposition through computer supported data recording process transforming field notes to intermediary artefacts might mitigate communicative unease. Having joint log and electronically supported sharing practices in a team consisting of people of different ages genders and social backgrounds is of course not a panacea. Nevertheless, sharing one's own field notes, reading others' notes, commenting on them, seeing how the observational log develops through version history of joint Gooledoc provided a valuable tool for accomplishing collaboration in a systemic way. Making individual observations informed by exposure to the eyes of our peers we literally read and wrote together always finding ourselves in-between different angles. Personal perspectives started to intra-act contributing to the better understanding of the field and of the team-work (Barad 2014). Different standpoints were a benefit to the research process making us aware of concerns stemming from individual professional and personal positions. That deeply enriched our analysis as storytelling practices, observational techniques, electronic devices, photos and files interweaved in the ongoing flow of the common project activities. We gradually became accustomed to the 'fluid materiality' (Sørensen 2007) of our research practice, accepting the view on notes as a point of 'time-specific negotiation' (Sørensen 2007) between various perspectives. We intentionally refrain from taking the stance of radical symmetry between humans and non-humans developed by actor-network theory. Not to diminish the importance of the study of the alliances of objects we presume that human subjectivity is still a workable idea when it comes to the potentialities of digitally mediated communication (cf. Braidotti 2013). Computer-aided writing surely transforms the materiality of ethnographic labour. However, being digitally mediated and, thus, to an extent, artificial, the collective ethnographic work still depends on the art of human communication orchestrating diverse subjectivities to conduct collaborative action.

Digital data processing embeds the unity of technical and social competences required by digitally mediated ethnography no less as by pre-digital ethnographies (cf. Ball 1990). The notion of intermediary artefact as a tool emerging in human communication to mediate the process (Lee 2007) seems to deliver most aptly the nature of collaborative writing. Regarding their function in negotiations inside and between communities of practice Lee (2007) distinguishes five types of artefacts mediating communication. Self-explanatory artefacts, including notes and sketches done by a professional, in privacy, to facilitate her own working process (Lee 2007, 319). Inclusion artefacts are built on self-explanatory ones when it comes to proposing new ideas and tools to another community

of practice (321). Compilation and structuring artefacts (e.g. maps, charts or tables) are used for referential coordination, the latter with clear intention to direct the activity of others (321–331). Borrowed artefacts, finally, are imported from outside to better represent some idea in the negotiation process (331ff.). All types indicated in her research appear to have some relevance in the context of our project. However, in our case, only one communication medium, in the form of a joint Google Doc, containing all field notes, was used for team references and discussions. Therefore, we would prefer to talk of mediation strategies applied to a specific kind of object, i.e. electronic log. In our view it is the *intra-action* (Barad 2014) of these mediation strategies, like borrowing, (self)-explanation or structuring, that generates, from our field notes, a complex artefact instead of a mere collection of independent personal accounts. Examples that follow will present the cases where field notes are employed as intermediary artefacts.

## Examples

### Example 1. Compilation

Since team members were initially unaccustomed to ethnography, they were keen not to miss anything important in the field. Records of the project's first month (February 2016) typically consist of extensive individual inputs following one another. As more researchers started to do fieldwork notes became even lengthier although still with no clear focus and structure. During weekly debriefings that problem was discussed. Peter, the only male in the team, suggested to shadow boys during P.E. and breaks as they might feel constrained in the presence of other team members. Since most observational sessions were accomplished in pairs other fieldworkers mostly shadowed girls during P.E. and elsewhere outside classrooms. During the breaks or at the end of the day Peter and his fellow fieldworker merged their remarks and uploaded joint notes in the electronic log that was immediately accessible to the whole group. The resulting entries were produced through the compilation of separate personal records, which quite often were supplemented by memory accordingly to the details mentioned in the peer record. The final notes look like a patchwork of interweaving lines.

*Fragment of Peter and Olga's entry. March 2016.*

Olga's lines are in italics. Supplements made after the initial reading of each other notes before upload to the joint log are marked in bold.

Boys are having some secret conversation. They discuss Molly's (*a female classmate*) looks today? **Cursing. Not sure.** Then they start to do push-ups except for Tom, an obese and awkward boy. Others are punching him 'Hey, Big Tasty [**referring to a kind of McDonald's burger**], do you want to do some push-ups?' *At the other side of the gym, girls are doing stretching. Anna forgot her gym suit. She is upset. The teacher is consoling her. Meanwhile Harry (**got a new iphone in his pocket?**) and Nick (with earphones plugged in his ears) are playing chess. Amy, Kathy and Jay stopped doing stretching. They're tired. So fast? Discussing something energetically. Seems their English class assignments.*

This sort of compilation requires tight collaboration between fieldworkers and a clear distribution of responsibilities. The pairs of observers were reshuffled constantly, so team members had to get accustomed to the writing strategies of their new fellow fieldworkers. Alexandra preferred to make handwritten notes and then copied them to an electronic file

at the end of the day. She deliberately left double or even triple spaces between the lines of her notes, offering her field co-workers to supplement. Yet some kept their records independently. Alexandra's writing strategy was also hugely influenced by her bodily experience (Taylor 2013) of pregnancy at the time of research. She often felt hungry, sleepy, and too relaxed for observing 'properly' and sometimes she was outright irritated or bored by repetitive classroom practices (Breidenstein 2007). Under such circumstances a researcher critically depends on empathy and support from her peers otherwise compilation fails, and field notes are incomplete.

*Fragment from Alexandra's records. February 2016*

The teacher talked to Dan during the break.

The class starts.

The teacher says: 'Why so much noise?'

Billy is crying.

### **Example 2. Borrowing**

According to Lee (2007, 331 ff.) borrowing refers to the situations when ideas and their material representations travel across the boundaries of diverse communities of practice. Examination of our experience shows that communicative attitudes might be transferred as well. In the course of the observations, teachers frequently referred to the observers' presence while maintaining discipline in class. At times that made an impression of a classroom almost visibly split into two worlds – those of adults and those of children. The emphasis on student obedience might mirror a deep-seated belief in the hierarchical nature of teacher-student communication. Teachers' behavioural patterns might also signal distrust and suspicion towards observers as potential representatives of an outside controlling power. The divide between teenagers and children constantly stressed by the latter effectively obstructed participatory relationships of students and researchers. Although almost all teachers seemed reluctant to start long conversations with children, some seemed more inclined to horizontal communication and yet still afraid of slipping to 'idle chatter'. Older research team members gradually and almost unconsciously borrowed teacher-like restrictive discursive attitudes while describing classroom life.

*Fragment from Diana's records. April 2016. (Italics added)*

Tom and Anna *were sent to have lunch* in the dining room. *Instead they deliberately fled* with lunch boxes and spent the whole time hiding behind the lockers; Nina draws a unicorn on her hand in brown eyeliner during the class, Ali and John are talking to each other *loudly*, Tony *rushed out of classroom* to answer a phone call after the class had started *without the teacher's permission*.

With no chance to delve into the children's world as such, the researcher can still capture some specific details of everyday school routine. To create the sense of presence and support validity claims, a fieldworker might transform her notes into a hybrid object, a combination of her own words and images. Since taking photos during the class was not possible on a regular basis, team members memorised details that attracted their attention and then searched for images of similar objects on the internet. Thus, they

borrowed images from external visual repositories to stand for their perceptions *hic et nunc*.

*Fragment from Kathy's field notes. February 2016. (Italics added)*

Nick has got a funny pencil case. With Spider-Man on it. *Just like that* (Figure 1).

### Example 3. (Self)-explanation and structuring

In the context of teamwork, the gradual meaning-making of the field of each observer depends on on-site and electronic collegial discussions and collective debriefings, reading the common log, and writing field notes together. Collaborative practice inevitably requires the clarification of one's own assumptions and a re-examining of one's own previous records in order to get a better understanding. Personal records were not accomplished at once becoming an ethnographic monument to a moment of observation. They effectively turn into field notes through checks and corrections provoked by a constant comparison of angles, not only by colleagues but by the original observer. This process of writing notes has great (self)-explanatory potential (Figure 2).

The 'map' of the German class with indications of seats taken by the children and observers themselves provides both (self)-explanatory and structuring functions. Sitting near Polly and Anna L., Anastasia was able to correct her earlier reverse misidentification of these two girls. While typing up her record during the class she immediately made a memo to check and correct all her previous entries. The chart with an indication of all the seats including observers conveys a better understanding of what they were able to see. Unsurprisingly in this record Diana is mentioned much less than Polly Anna P. or Stacey. Good (1987) was among the first to show how teachers tend to call more often on students who sit in the front row and middle seats in the classroom (the T-pattern)



Figure 1. Pencil case.

6th lesson (German)			
Anna L. .... Clo	Trisha ..... Mary C.	Nick ..... Diana	
Anna P. .... Polly	Tommy ..... Ted	Luke ..... Mary B.	
Me ..... Another Observer	Stacey ..... Billy	Tony ..... Will	

Примечание [1]: in my previous entries Ana L. must be renamed to Polly!

Figure 2. Fragment from Anastasia's digital field notes.

and ignored students outside this imaginary ‘T’. The point of reference here is the teacher’s table. For observers (here sitting in the back row) their own position also serves as an implicit point of reference

## Discussion

Developmental psychology to which most members of the project team belonged by training precludes observation with theoretical provisions. A predesigned observational protocol is also required. A researcher thus encounters phenomena like a doctor simultaneously ‘diagnosing’ them and labelling with certain categories. The result of observation is at most an illustration of the ideas of reality the observer had beforehand. Concerned with the vagueness of our method we intentionally turned this concern into a cause of reflection (Tanggaard 2013). In contrast to psychological observation our approach was not framed by any unifying theory in advance. Ethnographers, who examined connections of different seeing and writing angles in collaborative work (Bufford May and Pattillo-McCoy 2000; Carroll and Jessica 2011; Gallagher and Freeman 2011; Clerke and Hopwood 2014), stood out as an operational mode most clearly resonating with our thinking. The idea of artefact emerged as we gradually realised how dependent on social and technical intra-action we were.

Meanwhile, our work raised issues relevant to the predicament of education research and practice. While focusing on certain points of teacher-student or student-student interaction we tend to catch some aspects of Russian school culture in the present and to an extent in the past as teachers might be reasonably presumed to represent cultural legacies of the former times. The making of collaborative ethnography interweaved with the reflections on class management strategies especially when we witnessed potentially distressing and/or harmful for children teaching practices. Sometimes it was hard to stifle a desire to give a clue to a teacher. Although collaborative experience probably changed us as educators it is still a challenge to bring our findings back to schools in a fruitful way to change teacher-student relations. For instance, broader dissemination of digitally mediated communication practices of a kind that we used might prove to be productive in terms of fostering collaboration in class. The variations of proximity and distance permeating collaborative observation turn out to be instrumental for the better understanding of educational settings. Our experience could be regarded as instrumental for teacher’s education to an extent it instantiates transformation of individualist self-positioning of a teacher into a collectively shared perspective of horizontal collaboration in the learning process.

There are several important outcomes of our experience that hopefully could benefit further attempts to do digitally mediated collaborative ethnography. Since team work implied constant sharing of records practices and insights the conception of individual data ownership was profoundly shaken. In fact, it is the team that owns the data, which, in turn, represents an entangled web of references (self)-explanations borrowing and structuring efforts. Digitally mediated collaborative ethnography pulls seeing and writing out of the scope of an *a priori* identifiable individual authorship. Although, of course, not resolved completely, validity concerns (Belgrave and Smith 1995) are tackled with growing awareness and continuity as team members gradually reach agreement regarding the most effective techniques of delivering the sight of the site to the broader audience.

That said, ethnographic teamwork should not be regarded as a mere chance to capture more details that might have been omitted by a solo practitioner. Collaboration is not accumulation but rather a composition. The very act of crafting the joint electronic log somehow materialised complex temporality of the (hi)stories of our collaboration (cf. Sørensen 2007). Project records represent a multilayered structure. Individual experimentations with the strategies of seeing and writing (e.g. making breaks in writing to have a quick look around, embedding photos or drawings in the fieldnotes, colouring passages) also informed the process of collaboration. Through the interplay of comments, merges, insertions, edits, and cuts, the facts of the observation were reworked and reshaped as *artefacts*. Individual traveling, back and forth, to the field during the project, interweaved with joint traveling back and forth along the records of our project, as they gradually evolved in our joint Google Doc. This twofold experience prevented us from being lured into the idea of overarching empirical observation, putting the mere capacity of seeing, *per se*, on top.

Crafting observation as a multifaceted process, we developed a better sense of researcher's positioning while doing ethnography. Making one's own research activity informed by exposure to the actions of our peers goes beyond transforming individual writing and reading strategies (Ruth 2016). Personal memories, storytelling practices, material environments of collaboration and joint paper templates started to intra-act in a way that resembles a football game. A player can never know the plot, not because there is not one, but because he himself is actively engaged in creating the story. On the other hand, his own actions are no less an artefact of the game. The constant variation of repetitiveness and novelty established the essence of our collaborative ethnographic practice. Being there in a classroom sometimes makes observation like carrying water from a mountain stream by a sieve. A field worker must choose and prioritise as well as a lone researcher. Yet it is the confluence of personal records in the inter-play of collaborative writing that effectively leads to a sustained set of valid outcomes as they corroborate and supplement each other.

Since almost every observational session was performed by two researchers a certain convergence was in-built in the processes of seeing and writing from the start. Our field notes contain an abundance of recurrent themes and scenes. Some blind spots also came out. As the project progressed, it became obvious how observers had regularly dismissed certain kinds of actors in favour of others. When 'I' is present in a classroom, 'I' am looking for somebody who I can identify with – based on my school experience and my knowledge about myself. If I imagine myself as a sarcastic and introverted individual, I am especially interested in children that are predominantly alone (their activities, communications, mood), in curious mistakes and in children's chatting with each other; I admit that somebody, e.g. more extraverted, focuses automatically on the children's games etc. This could not be improved by merely putting 'We' instead of 'I' in the context of observation and data processing. Digital ethnographies might tacitly produce certain alienation effects making observers more detached from those observed than ever before.

## Conclusion

The patchwork of collectively accessible electronic records is made up of notes and the links between them. When a new note is added this transforms the whole collection. Adventures of the ethnographic sight constantly travelling in-between seeing and

writing reveal themselves in the field notes through edits, corrections, and insertions representing shadowed conversations of researchers with each other and their memories. Bamberg (2006) coined the term ‘small story’ to pinpoint the underrepresented conversational activities built into the ongoing flow of events that a narrative researcher uses in the field. We would like to extend this term to cover the storied nature of digitally mediated collaborative writing. A group might, of course, conform to a leader on how things were or are. Our group certainly selected what to present, finally. However, it was not about selecting one single perspective to stand for the whole. Instead we focused on variations, given the dual physical/virtual materiality of our data processing strategies.

Our paper brings to the forefront the entanglement of ethnographers and their notes. Digitally mediated writing apparently goes not without risks. Apart from the well-known pedagogical ‘meliorism’ (Peshkin 1988) we would like to point out to the possibility of technological meliorism in the ethnographic practice, i.e. a temptation to make collaborative notes ever more precise and comprehensive thus potentially involving in the constant editing process. The multitude of edits readily accessible through version history handwritten minutes of weekly debriefings supporting drawings charts and images uploaded from photobanks and relevant data collections stands behind our academic papers as products of our project. Again, there is room between the intensive *ex-ante* collective deliberations of the observational practice and the *in res* joint work of crafting the artefacts of ethnography.

Just being out there in the school environment is only a tiny fraction of the much bigger task of coming to grips with uncertainty regarding the authorship of research. The artificiality of field notes can have a disordering effect on the research making it less clear who contributes to the products of an ethnographic work and who is to be held responsible for its validity, granted that it extends beyond solo observing and writing. This paper reveals the complicated relationships among the human actors of observation and the temporal materiality of their observational and writing techniques as they emerge in the practice of collaborative ethnographic doing. We unveiled its fabric following mainly the line of joint digital crafting of field notes. While underlying the importance of digitally equipped ethnographic research our paper also contributes to the discussion of the impact of fieldwork on a researcher herself. Working collectively team members explore and exchange their personal memories to embed out-of-sight dimensions of the field. Sometimes researchers might be easily trapped by false similarities of school life in the past and now. Through writing commenting and editing in the joint digital log one realises how multilayered memories are. Collaborative practice inevitably requires careful re-examination of one’s own self. Multiple personal histories and fieldwork are getting interweaved stimulating the reassessment of previous and further biographic and professional trajectories. We have not exhausted the challenges that digital collaboration might evoke; however, we would be happy to foster further discussion of the means and ends of contemporary education ethnography.

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