

Meagan Mazurkewicz
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Unit 8 Writing Assignment – Final Paper

Participant observation is a qualitative method that is meant to help researchers gain a familiarity with a given group of individuals and perspectives held by study populations. Participant observation takes place in community settings and in locations assumed to have some relevance to the research questions that we are asking. For example, educational issues would typically take place in the classroom. The method is unique because the researcher approaches the participants in their own environment rather than having the participants come to them. The researcher tries to learn what life is like for an “insider” while remaining, an “outsider.” Researchers make careful notes about what they see, objectively, and record accounts and observations. Informal conversation and interaction with the participants are also important parts of the information gathered. This is a very useful inquiry tool when it comes to the field of education. It is difficult to understand the many educational problems and issues from just an outsider’s observation. You need to be able to get a closer look; and “insiders” view on what is happening in the classroom or the educational setting. Then, you can gather the information you have collected and take an objective stance on how to improve and increase understanding.

The advantages of participant observation include the ability to gain rich data, analytical validity, interpretive understanding, and low cost; all which are extremely important when it comes to educational inquiry. According to G.A. Fine, participant observation provides for rich and detailed data. When direct observation is united with the questioning of the participants about their choices and decisions and then combined with active involvement by the researcher, the value is apparent. It produces a fullness of understanding. In the educational setting, it is sometimes difficult to understand the decisions that educators make without seeing them in their natural setting; the classroom. Being able to be a participant in the classroom allows you to see the cause and effect of decisions made by the educator and the reactions of the students to those decisions. Being involved in the everyday activities provides a deeper understanding of what is happening then simply observing from a window as an outside spectator. As a participant observer, you learn a lot about the participants (students and educator included) and can take that information and use it to see all angles of a discussion or situation. Participant observation is useful for gaining an understanding of the physical, social, cultural, and economic conditions in which participants live. It helps us to understand the relationships among people and their ideas, norms, and events as well as their behaviors and activities.

Another benefit to participant observation is its validity. The observations are of witnessed behavior; not inferences. As the observer, you are documenting facts and real life situations that are occurring. You are right in the middle of the action; dictating every detail that occurs. If you were an outsider, you would not be privy to the personal thoughts, ideas, and reactions to what is happening in the classroom. In Mary Catherine Bateson’s article, *Learning in Layers*, she discusses participant observation involving two levels: one in which “I am present in the situation as a participant, and at the next level up I am outside the situation as an observer, so I am potentially aware of my double role and the ongoing situation that involves me in that double role” (p. 123). The double role allows you to see the situation at different angles and be objective

about what you are experiencing. This allows the observer to make conclusions based on evidence gathered from a variety of angles; thus making the validity more solid. Bateson also comments on the practical ethic of participant observation in her article. She says that “we must live and think inside our own experiences; and outside of them at the same time. We need to act as the “loyal opposition” to our own ideas and preferences” (Bateson, *Learning in Layers*).

She also discusses the ability of someone trained in participant observation to discuss the observations with the hosts, making them also participant observers; to gain additional knowledge and understanding. For example, when observing an educator in their classroom, Bateson talks about allowing them to be participant observers, challenging the educators to consider alternative approaches to their teaching; especially if what they are currently doing is not successful. There are many serious issues in education today. Often times, educators don't take the time to take a step back and become an observer of their own teaching strategies. It is important to be an active participant in your classroom, observing how your students are learning the information that you are teaching; and most importantly noting when they are not. Participant observation allows us to see things that we may not typically see; thus providing us with ability to improve upon our strategies and continually add new ideas and tools to increase the success of our students. Bateson also believes that “we need children to learn to observe themselves observing even as they participate and simultaneously move up logical levels when faced with contradictions” (p. 124). Teacher training in participant observation needs to occur; as well as teaching them to reflect upon their experiences, so they may change things about their teaching to benefit the outcome when it comes to student education.

Another benefit of participant observation is the fact that it produces research characterized by personal understanding. In G.A. Fine's article he says that “participant observation with its emphasis on participation and observation adds to research knowledge. By directly involving the researcher in the activity, one can understand on an immediate level the dynamics and motivations of behavior” (p. 11074). An added benefit of participant observation is the fact that it is “non-capital intensive”. In most cases, participant observation is relatively inexpensive; which is not the case for most other types of educational inquiry. The researcher is usually the only one involved in the project, which allows him or her to decide what their involvement entails. In the field of education, anything involving low cost is essential due to the lack of funding nationwide.

Participant observation allows the researcher to observe before they participate and take the data from both situations and put them together to gather the most effective amount of information to use to improve understanding. In G.A. Fine's article on participant observation, he notes that this methodology depends heavily on the establishments of relationships; and it relies upon sociability. He says that “the researcher who lacks the ability to make connections will have difficulty collecting credible research data” (G.A. Fine, p. 11076). This relates well to the field of education; in which relationships are essential to the education of our students. Also in Fine's article, he suggests that participant observation as a form of inquiry allows the researcher to use his or her background and experience to better understand and describe the phenomena. He reminds us that it also tends to showcase our individual beliefs and biases. Being “outsiders” to the events that we are observing can provide limitations in our research which can

be somewhat confusing. This can make the ethnographic research more reliable and of greater value.

“Participant observation involves the active engagement of the researcher with the members of the community that he or she wishes to study, typically as an equal member of the group” (G.A. Fine, p. 11073). It also involves becoming fully absorbed in that which they are trying to learn. This may sometimes include engrossing oneself in the culture of a certain people (like in *Whale Rider*; putting yourself in the role of the Maori people), and becoming a full participant of that culture. As the participant observer, you become more aware of what you are researching and are able to see things in the eyes of the participants; thus giving you a deeper and more fulfilling understanding of your research. In relating to education, sometimes you have to put yourself in the role of the educator (and especially in the role of the students) in order to see alternate ways to produce the information to gain understanding.

We see some excellent examples of participant observation in Mary Catherine Bateson’s book, *Peripheral Visions*. This book emphasizes the importance of “learning along the way” and being a participant observer in many aspects of your life to allow yourself to learn about the world around you in ways that you wouldn’t typically do so. We follow Bateson and her daughter throughout their life learning important aspects of the world around them. Bateson makes many references to her childhood and how her past has taught her many things about her future. She may not have realized what was happening at the time, but looking back on it and becoming a participant observer, she has prepared not only herself, but her daughter for what is to come. She didn’t learn everything about life in a book or in a classroom. She learned it while living her life and observing everything that occurred in her life. She searched for deeper meaning and understanding and used that information to guide her way. As Bateson states, “the most important skill to learn in life is to learn over a lifetime, those things that no one yet understands”.

Bateson says that participant observation is more than a research methodology; it is a way of being, especially suited to a world of change. In the field of education, change is inevitable; something we are bound to always have to concern ourselves with; which makes participant observation such an important form of inquiry. How can we adapt to the change that is happening if we are unaware of what that change entails? Taking a participant observer role allows us to witness that change first hand; so we may be more prepared to handle it in the educational setting. One thing, as participant observers, that we need to be careful about is making assumptions based on a “common understanding” of what we have seen in past experiences. This is what makes the task of being a participant observer sometimes difficult. It is very challenging to be completely objective when you have preconceived ideas of what something should look like. We need to try and imagine how different people with different perspectives see the world so we may have a more full understanding of what it really means to be a participant observer.