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Ethnography as instructional tool in the teaching and learning of anthropology

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Abstract

This research investigates how ethnography acts as an instructional tool in teaching and learning anthropology. Through a classroom ethnography of a postgraduate anthropology course, it illustrates how ethnography as a 'psychological tool' mediates anthropological pedagogy. The author was a non-participant observer for twelve weeks in a South African Ethnography seminar-course, taught by a noted South African anthropologist. In a descriptive-interpretive analysis of richly detailed ethnographic data, the researcher traces the micro-genetic processes of concept development to illustrate the role of ethnography in mediating understanding of anthropological ways of thinking. The study is theoretically informed by the seminal work of Lev Vygotsky's (1987) sociocultural-historical approach to cognitive development and anthropologist Clifford Geertz's (1988) view of ethnography as an instrument of communication, a vehicle of thought. Vygotksy's theory is applied and extended in a triple-stranded analysis incorporating neo-Vygotskian activity-theory (Wertsch, 1991) and signification-theory (Miller, 2011) as these theories are integrated by Bakhtin's (1986) theory of dialogicality, in a context of higher education as a community of practice. In extending Vygotsky's sociocultural approach to cognitive development, the research argues that, and demonstrates that, ethnography as a psychological tool is a 'model of' and 'model for' the teaching and learning of anthropology.

Key words:

ethnography – psychological tool – anthropological pedagogy – sociocultural learning theory – activity theory – signification theory – dialogicality – community of practice