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# Creating Space for Visual Ethnography in Educational Research

*Creando Espacio para la Etnografía Visual en la Investigación Educativa*

*Criando Espaço para a Etnografia Visual na Pesquisa Educacional*

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**Abstract:** This article maps the territory of visual ethnography as a key and accessible research methodology in education. It aims to provide an overview and to present theory and practice for future research. The origins and principles of visual ethnography are disclosed as well as some methods to gather data. From the premise that either created by the researcher, by the participants, or through collaboration between both, images may be the core of analysis of social and cultural views and perceptions of students, educators, administrators and community members. The author addresses ethical issues like confidentiality, and highlights possible biases like authenticity, negotiated construction, trustworthiness, and deception of information. The main conclusions highlighted the importance of visual ethnography as a key methodology to elicit rich data that access students' voices, the space for participatory techniques, and the role of technology as an undeniable participant.

**Keywords:** Educational research; visual ethnography; visual methods; ethics; bias.

**Resumen:** Este artículo aborda la etnografía visual como una opción metodológica dentro de la investigación educativa. Su objetivo es proveer una perspectiva teórica y percepción global para futuras investigaciones. Se incluyen los orígenes y principios de la etnografía visual, así como algunos métodos para la recolección de datos con ejemplos de aplicaciones prácticas. Desde la premisa que, ya sea creada por quien investiga, participantes o mediante la colaboración entre ambos grupos, las imágenes pueden ser el núcleo del análisis de las opiniones y percepciones sociales y culturales de estudiantes, personal educativo y administrador, e integrantes de la comunidad. El artículo también aborda una serie de temas éticos y de prejuicios que se pueden enfrentar durante la aplicación de esta metodología como lo son la confidencialidad, la autenticidad, la negociación construida, la integridad y la posible información engañosa. Entre las principales conclusiones se destaca la importancia de la etnografía visual como una metodología clave que suscita datos exhaustivos que permiten la interpretación de las voces de sus participantes, el uso de técnicas participativas en la investigación y el papel innegable de la tecnología como participante.

**Palabras claves:** Investigación educativa; etnografía visual; métodos visuales; ética; prejuicio.



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**Resumo:** Este artigo mapeia o território da etnografia visual como uma importante e acessível metodologia de pesquisa em educação. Ele tem como objetivo fornecer um panorama e apresentar a teoria e sua prática para futuras pesquisas. As origens e os princípios da etnografia visual são apresentados, bem como alguns métodos para a coleta de dados. A partir da premissa criada pelo pesquisador, pelos participantes ou pela colaboração entre ambos, as imagens podem ser o núcleo da análise das visões e percepções sociais e culturais dos estudantes, educadores, administradores e membros da comunidade. O autor aborda questões éticas como anonimato e confidencialidade e destaca possíveis vieses como autenticidade, construção negociada, confiabilidade e informações equivocadas. As principais conclusões enfatizaram a importância da etnografia visual como uma importante metodologia para conseguir dados valiosos que acessem as vozes dos alunos, o espaço para técnicas participativas e o papel da tecnologia como um inegável participante.

**Palavras-chave:** Pesquisa educacional; etnografia visual; métodos visuais; ética; discriminação.

## Introduction: Is There Room for Visual Ethnography in Educational Research?

The answer to this question is relevant to anyone accountable to educational research success. Educational researchers should care about making room for visual ethnography not only because such methodology accounts for qualitative approaches to human behaviour, but also because it enlarges the scope of educational processes' understanding. The common expression "A picture is worth a thousand words" conveys the idea that an image is full of meaning. This expression suggests that meaning is usually difficult to describe with words and that photographs are instead a mean to enrich the sharing of ideas. In addition, words can sometimes be inaccessible or easily misinterpreted, which makes images an alternative source of communication. Also, visual representations can record the complex behaviour of people and their surroundings. Since images can easily evoke feelings and reactions on the observer, people use them to represent the involvement of the body with the environment. In this pursuit for representation, the use of visuals in qualitative research bridges people and their realities. Either created by the researcher, by the participants, or through collaboration between both, images may be the core of analysis of social and cultural views and perceptions. Research built on visual images can take many forms; one of them is visual ethnography.

The value of images in research processes is rooted in its permeated role in our imaginations, technologies, texts, and conversations and more directly in how they inform individuals' personalities, narratives, lifestyles, cultures, and societies. In research, images inspire conversations, that at the same time may evoke the memory of experiences that are an inevitable part of the environments where we live and where we do research (Pink, 2013). The purpose of this document is to gain a wide understanding of not only about visual ethnography but also about some visual methods in educational research. Through an in-depth examination of theoretical and practical contributions, this paper aims at positioning visual ethnography as an accessible research methodology. It is my interest to extent the dialogue, reflection and invitation to other educational researchers to open up to non-traditional approaches to knowing about the education world.

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This paper situates visual ethnography as a research methodology and describes photography, drawing, film, and web-based media as methods of data gathering. Then, two visual ethnographies are described in an attempt to analyze the application of this methodology in real settings. Following, the document presents an exploration of some ethical concerns and biases. Drawing on the implications of using this methodology, the last lines focus on recommendations for future research practice.

## Principles and Origin of Visual Ethnography

In an attempt to understand visual ethnography, key characteristics of ethnography as a research methodology need to be addressed. The historical background of this methodology dates back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and it is rooted in anthropology (LeCompte, & Preissle, 2003). According to Van Maanen, 1988, 1995, 2006, cited by Bloomberg and Volpe (2016), in this type of qualitative inquiry, “the researcher studies an entire cultural or social group on its natural setting, closely examining customs and ways of life, with the aim of describing and interpreting cultural patterns of behaviour, values, and practices” (p. 47). A more detailed examination of its purpose is given by Reeves, Kuper and Hodges (2008) when they determined that “the central aim of ethnography is to provide rich, holistic insights into people’s views and actions, as well as the nature (that is, sights, sounds) of the location they inhabit, through the collection of detailed observations and interviews” (p. 512). Though this particular assumption includes the key role of context, it clearly restricts the various methods that can be used. It is this opening to other ways to gather data that gives room to the role of visuals in ethnography.

Visual ethnography can be understood “as the study of visual forms and visual system in their cultural context” (Banks, 1998, citado por Kharel, 2015, p. 153). There are important reasons why this methodology deserves a space in qualitative pursues. Writing on two main reasons, Banks (2007) mentioned that as images are ever-present in society their representation should be included in all studies of society, and that study of images in the creation or collection of data may reveal sociological understanding that may not be accessible by other means. It is also important to note that visual ethnography is not independent of ethnography. Indeed, just as ethnography research is sometimes intertwined with elements such images, technology and ways of seeing to make knowledge, visual ethnography seeks to provoke a deeper reflexive engagement of these elements in ethnographic search for meaning and understanding in educational processes (Pink, 2013). Visual ethnography is a research methodology that brings “theory and practice of visual approaches to learning and knowing about the world and communicating these to others” (Pink, 2013, p. 6). Here, the methods used to collect data serve the aims of the research and not the research serve the aims of the methods chosen for this process (McGuigan, 1997).



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As a final point concerning visual ethnography, [Pink \(2013\)](#) insisted on the importance of a reflexive approach that supports this methodology. She kept in mind the centrality of the subjectivity of the researchers in their attempt to produce ethnographic knowledge. The researcher should be the channel through which individuals' reality is constructed. However, it is clear that reality is subjective and it is known only as the individuals experience it. On this note, reality is not objective and it should not be recorded through scientific methods. Here is where a reflexive approach takes central stage so that it fosters a clear focus on how "ethnographic knowledge about how individuals experience reality is produced, through the intersubjectivity between researchers and their research context" ([Pink, 2013, p. 36](#)).

Visual ethnography should evoke a negotiation of the participants' version of reality and a constant questioning on the part of the researcher. [Schembri and Boyle \(2013\)](#) contributed to the understanding of the process of analysis by expounding on how visual ethnographers develop appropriate systematic modes and manners of analytical processes on site, as the project unfolds. They also suggested that what allows researchers to read cultural experience and interpret a visual text is the process of cultural immersion. Just as in any ethnography research, "the treatment of written text, visual text is compared, contrasted, and sorted into categories until a particular aspect of the culture is identified" ([Schembri & Boyle, 2013, p. 1252](#)). As any other research methodology, there is a variety of methods available to conduct visual ethnography. Educational researchers are invited to exercise judgment when choosing them by analyzing which ones align with each study purpose. The next section describes some methods available as well as some considerations of use and an example.

## What Methods to Gather Data Are Available?

Visual ethnography is not understood as a method, but rather, a methodology. On this account, photography, drawings, films, and web-based media are tools through which the ethnographer can encounter other individuals' worlds. In the particular case of educational ethnography, the worlds and voices of the students, teachers, administrators and community members deserve not only to be heard but also their significance should encourage researchers to turn their attention to look for ways to capture participants' deepest beliefs, attitudes and behaviors.

## Photography

A starting point of analysis of visual methods is that "no visual image or practice is essentially ethnographic by nature" ([Pink, 2013, p. 73](#)). With this in mind, educational researchers should consider the idea that the essence of a photograph is not the subject matter but the appropriation of meaning given to it. Years ago, the possibility to capture photographs in the field was limited by technological constraints and even economic ones. Manipulating a personal

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camera required being able to buy the device and being able to manipulate it accurately. These are no longer issues of concern; smartphones have made the collection of photos an accessible and easy endeavour. With this advantage, ethnographers have moved a step forward in opening the space for the gathering of these types of data. With the accessibility of photography, participants are even able to create their visual representations, and are no longer limited to being represented by the researchers

A further step of analysis can be understood as photo-elicitation. This process can be explained as an approach in which remembering involves not just recalling events, but also why and how a picture was taken, what it represents about the participant's thoughts and feelings at the time, as well as what they retrospectively think and feel looking at the photograph in the present (Frith, Riley, Archer, & Gleeson, 2005). The richness of this process is the interaction between the researcher and the participants where member-checking of data makes a more robust reality construction. Another way photo-elicitation can be used is when the ethnographer pregenerates the pictures and shows them to the participants. With these pregenerated photos, the researcher can trigger discussion or memory or can even use them to evoke reflection on the fringes of experience, on invisible aspects of self and on aspects difficult to articulate (Harris & Guillemin, 2012). The kind of information sought delineates the way photographs are approached. It is this same specification of aim that can lead to other visual methods in ethnography.

One example of the use of this method is the one shared by Lomax (2012) in her ethnography about children's image-making. In her study, 14 children took part as co-researchers who generated a number of visual outputs, including over 600 photographs. The images included the participants' natural and physical environment as well as images of themselves and other children. Her main purpose was to encompass image-makers' expectations and understandings to develop an approach in which contexts of production could be theorized (pp. 228-229).

## Drawing

Drawings can also be used as a way to produce ethnographic knowledge. In the same way photos can be generated by the participants or the researcher, drawings can be created by the individuals or by the ethnographer through observations of the field. In a recent study, Kuschnir (2016) proposed a list of eleven potential benefits of the use of drawing in ethnography. She emphasized on either the researcher or the researched drawing in a sketchbook. These eleven benefits are: (1) drawing is an accessible, very low-cost tool for registering visual data, (2) the sketchbook and other drawing tools provide a physical and psychological support for the researcher, (3) drawing can provide a way to record and discuss memories (those of researchers and their interlocutors), (4) drawing can be an instrument to extend fieldwork,



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record the passage of time, and analyse the meaning of time, (5) drawing is an essential tool for documenting and analysing spatial information from research sites (maps, routes, views and panoramas), (6) drawing can refresh the observer's eyes, generating new points of view to understand the 'natives', (7) drawing helps the observer see and hear new things, (8) different types of drawing (and this includes diagrams) can help record and document not only objects and visual information, but also abstract concepts like emotions, motivations and social relationships, (9) fieldwork drawing promotes conversations between researchers and their interlocutors, generating closeness and empathy, (10) drawing openly during fieldwork can generate dialogue and collaborative research, and finally (11) drawing field notes provides visual data for sharing the results of the ethnography and also protects informant anonymity.

All these benefits can be easily foreseen in the classroom; low cost material is one of the many concerns of teachers and researchers, bridging prior knowledge to future experiences is also a learning day-to-day event, the role of interaction behind and while drawing in class has a strong pedagogical value as well. Added to this, drawing allows students/participants to express their feelings and ideas, as a means to self-express and to communicate to others. Its role in social science has marked a strong step in the understanding of human behaviour. As [Mitchell, Theron, Stuart, Smith, & Campbell \(2011, p. 19\)](#) explained

the use of drawings in social research is located within several broad yet overlapping areas of contemporary study [that] include arts-based or arts-informed research (Knowles & Cole, 2008), participatory visual methodologies (De Lange, Mitchell, & Stuart, 2007; Rose, 2001), [and] textual approaches in visual studies in the social sciences. (Mitchell, 2011)

An interesting argument about this type of representation is that drawings evoke sensory awareness in the participants. Though their use has been mainly focused on children, there is evidence of its implementation with adults. Their use acts as a prompt for participants to access different ways of understanding and feeling that are not easily accessible through words ([Harris & Guillemín, 2012](#)). In fact, this link between visuals and the senses has led the way to sensory ethnography ([Pink, 2012](#)). When proving the key role of evoking the senses in research, a 'sensory turn' and its profound impact on the way visual investigation has currently conceptualised; [Pink \(2012\)](#) noted "This [shift] has brought about a rethinking of visual culture studies with an acknowledgement of the relationship between the visual and the other senses" (p.11). This shift has opened a space for the incorporation of the body, the emotions and the senses which no doubt will enrich the process of meaning making in ethnography as a more holistic and complete reality can be represented. No doubt that incorporating drawing and elicitation in research may open a rich space of participants' analysis. For participants who are particularly fond of drawing, this method represents a connection to their role in the research. For some others, drawing can even be a self-expressive way to release stress. This practice documents emotions that are difficult to verbalize.

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Similarly to the approach used with photos, it is not the drawing alone that is analyzed; instead the ethnographer should open a space to the participants' interpretation of their drawing. It is not only the drawing but also the description that comprises the data. It is ideal that the ethnographer can draw on the participants' interpretation of their drawing in the analysis (Guillemin, 2004). Another key point is that this method is best used together with other research methods. This principle is typical of any type of research; visual ethnography is not an exception. The main reason is that it enables to compare data collected. When doing this, the analysis is not based on the drawing alone but is carried out together with data from other methods. This process will give both visual and word-oriented participants the chance to express their understanding in a way that best suits them (Guillemin, 2004). Along with drawings, films have played a significant role in ethnographic research.

An example of the use of drawing in educational research is the case of Bland's (2018) study. His study included investigations of school improvement, in which freehand drawing was used in different contexts with young people. The value of this study is the report provided about the high contribution of visual data to the research aims where factors such as the materials, time available, the teacher and peer influence were analyzed.

## Film

Filming can take many forms in ethnographic studies. This variety ranges from video-journaling, video analysis with participants, and recording situations and events. However, none of these are ethnographic per se; it is only when they are embedded within an ethnographic research that they take this form. Some important historical events on the use of ethnographic dates back to the early 1900s when the anthropologist Baldwin Spenser filmed aboriginal dances in Australia followed by some anthropological expeditions that were equipped with a film camera for documenting the customs and habits of the natives (Banks, 2007). Added to this, Flaherty released an interesting account of Inuits in his production *Nanook of the North*. He presented the ways in which their life was adopted to the environment and the uniqueness and relative autonomy of their cultural system (Banks & Morphy, 1997). It is worth noting that during the 1970s and 80s there was a debate between objective and creative research film. The former evoked unedited, not manipulated film while the latter were intended for public consumption (Pink, 2013). In this sense, it is important to reflect on the benefits of ethnographic film. MacDougall (1998) ascertained that "film is capable of presenting complex networks of images within which a variety of ambiguous cultural construction and resonances are understood" (p. 80). Also, videos are practical tools for research that can record for long periods of time, and parallel to photos, smartphones and digital cameras have made them even more accessible than before. Videos are literally in the hand of the researcher. Though training might be necessary to maximize its use.



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In contrast with this appreciation, [Pink \(2013\)](#) outlined three criticisms. First, people who are video-taped are always disturbed and the knowledge generated is constructed rather than natural. Second, knowledge should be produced in negotiation between participants and researcher and not a mere recording that can be taken home or to an office. Finally, videos are appropriated and re-appropriated in different contexts by the viewer, the researcher and the participants. Hence, the diversity of meaning and the validation of the viewer may impede a video to be ethnographic. In spite of these critics, the value of this method is well-articulated by Pink when she considered the role of participants' engagement and critical reflection. On this note, she observed:

visual ethnographers who are seeking to bring about change through their work tend to engage participants in video projects that enable them to reflect on their circumstances in useful ways, while at the same time are seeking to bring critical or revealing arguments to general publics or to groups in authority or with the power to make change. ([Pink, 2013, p.117](#))

The importance of film lies not in its value as a mere method of data gathering rather on the possibility to widen its lens to document complete narratives of social life and social interaction ([Kharel, 2015](#)). On this view, an example of the use of films, more specifically videos, in educational research is the study by [Xu, Widjaja and Ferguson \(2018\)](#) where they examined the methodological consequences of video-based approaches for understanding the nature of professional noticing. The value of the study lives in the way it allowed primary school teachers to take active roles in capturing, selecting and reflecting on significant classroom events on their own and with colleagues .

## Internet

The Internet has changed the way we communicate, learn, socialize, entertain and get informed so there is no surprise it has a direct effect on the way we do research. However, to get a clear understanding of its role in research, it is necessary to conceptualise the Internet under an ethnographic lens. In this attempt, it is identified as an environment or an invisible structure ([Pink, 2013](#)), and even as "an ethnographic site that interweaves non-digital realities and materialities" ([Pink, 2013, p. 131](#)). Based on this premise is that the concept web-based media is a method that interconnects image production, manipulation, browsing, and posting. Virtual settings share the same social group, natural setting, customs, ways of life, behaviour, values/practices characteristics of physical settings. It makes sense then to state that all those elements are present in virtual settings where different social groups adopt their customs and ways of life. Consequently, their behaviour, values, and practices can certainly be analyzed



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through an ethnographic lens. Web-media clearly relates to specific social networks like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest and Twitter. These networks have different strategies to establish relationships; you can make your groups with people you want to relate only, you can block people, you can hide information, you can share information on live mode, you can text or send audio messages, you can send private or collective texts and photos, and you can follow individuals and groups of interest.

Even though there is scepticism about the lack of face-to-face contact between researcher and researched, there are clear opportunities to obtain rich, holistic insights into people's views and actions, and the nature of the location they inhabit through the collection of detailed observations and interview. Virtual interaction has to be understood as different but not less significant. Face-to-face research pays attention to verbal utterances, facial expressions, tone of voice, body language, and sensory impressions of the environment; on its part, virtual research "take care to integrate visual aspects of the textual interactions ... and treat many visual data displayed ... such as the use of emoticons, pictures, colors, page layout, graphic design [and] the technological script of the site" (Ardévol, 2012, p. 78).

Technology has proved to be ever changing and unpredictable. It is almost impossible to speculate as to the extent it will continue influencing people's sociocultural relationships and meaning constructions. It includes the way research methods are used, and in this particular case how visual research can be understood. What it is required for sure is to have a flexible plan. Even when educational researchers are not fond of or have any experience in incorporating web-based methods, they should not close the door on opportunities to go beyond the traditional. Focusing on this idea, Ardévol (2012) agreed, "it has been argued that the incorporation of the Internet in ethnographic fieldwork provides the conditions for studying collectives that would be practically inaccessible without the use of these technologies" (p. 76). This claim is one robust argument that exemplifies the impact of Internet in research. Its benefits can be outlined as it allows: communication with participants who have limited time to meet, direct recording of information sent via email which can be a time saver since transcripts are not required, and even (massive) recruitment.

In the quest for a clear understanding, there may be questions with no robust answers. It is difficult to relate Internet with other virtual environments different from social networks, and the Internet is certainly more than that. The idea that a website or a forum are social structures is still vague rather they are recognized as spaces to display information. Even when people use them to discuss topics, there is just a process of uploading and commenting events. There are no records of ways of lives, behaviours, and customs because they are not natural settings. Another doubt that emerges is the idea that those social networks along with spaces like Youtube and Google Images can be used as mere methods to gather data instead of being seen as natural settings. With that said, there is no doubt the enormous variety of data that can be collected in our pursuit to construct realities.



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An example of the role of the internet in educational research spaces is the study by [Kilburn and Earley \(2015\)](#) where they presented an adaptation of focus groups by using a website-based commenting platform as a medium for discussion among participants. A crucial part of this research was the use of a virtual space “as a means of hosting a group discussion in response to preliminary findings”. Participants were “doctoral and early-career academic learners”. Authors stated that “website-based commenting appears to have potential as a means of facilitating learners’ engagement in educational e-research when ... distance, time, [and] access [are common constraints]” (p. 288).

In order to provide a practical understanding of how visual ethnography may look like, the next section describes two studies that opened up new possibilities to conduct educational research.

### Visual Ethnography in Practice: Two Examples

[Legge and Smith \(2014\)](#) reported their research in which they critically examined teacher education and experiential learning. They developed a visual ethnography in which they adapted photo-elicitation, created their version of a layered photograph analysis, and wrote a narrative inquiry to make meaning out of students’ lived experiences. The purpose was to use visual ethnography to critique their teaching in an outdoor education programme in the University of Auckland. To interrogate their educative focus a series of selected photographs that told a visual story were used. Through introspection, each participant wrote about the photographs and “[created] a layered ... narrative analysis reflecting on the educative focus of the images” ([Legge & Smith, 2014, p. 94](#)). Students also responded to others’ narratives by either challenging or supporting the reflexivity, the interpretation of joint perspectives about the learning context, pedagogic rationale and outcomes. Some of the highlighted conclusions of this visual ethnography were that outdoor environment offers students a variety of settings for experiential learning, that pedagogy models opportunities for practical experiences are challenging, also, researchers reinforced their belief in the educative value of experiential learning pedagogy and the strength of placed based experiences, and it reassured that from experiential learning student teacher can position their future planning and teaching in outdoor education.

Another really interesting visual ethnography study is the one reported by [Tobin and Hsueh \(2007\)](#) in which they aim at “[adding] ... the goals of documenting ..., informing ..., provoking self-reflection, challenging assumptions, creating things of beauty, entertaining, and giving pleasure” (p. 77) to the uses of video in educational research. More specifically, they identified their study as a video-cued multivocal ethnography. This study is embedded in a major research titled *Continuity and Change in Preschools of Three Cultures*. Their method was inspired by the ethnographic film *Jero on Jero: A Balinese Trance Séance Observed* and it resulted in using videotape to provoke reflection not just from the teachers videotaped, but also from their colleagues, their supervisors, and from their counterparts in other cities and other countries.

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They outlined six steps: videotaping a day in a pre-school, editing the tape, showing the tape to the classroom teacher to ask for comments, holding focus group discussions of the tape with staff at the preschool, “[holding] focus-group discussions with staff of other preschools around the country ... and [holding] focus-group discussions with staff of preschools in the two other countries in the study” (Tobin & Hsueh, 2007, p. 78). As major conclusions, the researchers found that videos can be very pleasurable, both to make and to watch, teachers are more likely to agree to participate in a study when it involves the use of video, rising concerns about the Internet are making parents more hesitant to give consent for their young children to be videotaped, it is increasingly difficult to get institutional approval to use video in educational research, and for most teachers the experience was of self-discovery and learning about others.

Like any other research methodology, visual ethnography is not without challenges. That is why examining the ethical pitfalls help researchers avoid fundamental ethical errors. The next section describes some ethical questions that raised after identifying key ideas about visual ethnography when writing this document.

## Ethical Concerns and Biases

There is no doubt that ethics is a serious issue that must concern all visual ethnographers. First, participants have the right to remain anonymous to the public and to choose which information to include or omit in the report. It is this final point that unveils the risks ethnographers take. When reflecting on any participant’s experience in a study where they capture photos and drawings, the next question arises, what if the participants choose to share their experiences with the researcher and limit her/him to not share them in any of the reports? That will jeopardize the study since the researcher will not be able to share or make public the core of this type of research. Even though the ethnographer can express findings verbally, no words will ever be as assertive as showing the visual representations. It is particularly important for researchers to seek for and use convincing strategies to obtain full consent. In addition to this issue is the understanding of open access and public domain. One important question to ask and answer is if using photographs and videos that are on open access spaces such as Youtube and Instagram can be used without permission from the participants.

Related to this conflict is anonymity. How can a researcher promise and honour this promise of anonymity when photographs and videos show hints and details of participants? Blurring a face is not enough when there is a background full of details that may guide the reader to find out who the person or group she or he is representing. Buildings and landscapes are clues that make readers easy to identify the settings. And then, what if the face and body of a participant is a map full of information that needs to include for a real interpretation and construction of the reality under scrutiny. Once again, writing and reading words will never be the same as contemplating and reading a visual representation.



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Like any other type of research, visual ethnography is confronted with bias. One that calls attention is the one of construction of images. The first point is that to construct a close reality, there must be a negotiation between participants and ethnographers. Researchers by their own cannot take a photograph, a drawing or a video produced by the participants and attempt to build an interpretation without listening to how they see, describe and explain the images and events behind them. If this negotiation is not included, the ethnography may result in an arbitrary incomplete meaning making. Also important to consider is the process when ethnographers are the ones getting the images; they definitely are influenced by their personal interpretations. They know what they want to obtain, so the naturalness and authenticity of these visual representations will always be influenced by their agenda. The second point of bias and one that triggers my doubts is the authenticity of the images chosen by the participants. There is no doubt that participants may tend to portray a more sophisticated reality. They may choose settings, objects, and events that do not represent their realities for different reasons. Deceiving photos and videos can obscure the ethnography. The third point is the consumption of images. Readers and viewers may consume the visual representations in different ways. Just as a researcher has preconceived (conscious and unconscious) agendas, viewers have different lenses that may corrupt the message. For both, points two and three, researchers can take a key role in following steps to minimize them, as to eradicate them is too ambitious. One step can be to give vast space for the participants to explain each image, so their meaning is always explicit.

The last point in this list of doubts is related to trustworthiness and deception in Internet visual ethnography. As time passed by, virtual identities in on-line spaces are more and more deceiving whether to protect themselves or to misrepresent themselves for particular gain purposes intentionally. Avatars, for example, are graphical representations of on-line users and they are used to represent a person. People use avatars as a way to disguise in virtual spaces to pass through unrecognized. So how can ethnographers deal with this confusing identity recognition? Fake behaviours in social networks are also deceiving. One clear example is the way users buy "likes" to pretend to be more popular or to try to popularize ideas. Content alteration is also a threat. People lie on a daily basis, and untrue information recorded on virtual spaces tend to be more and more every day. Here is where ethnographers need to develop skills to identify the linguistic traces of deception. Jeff Hancock, a professor of communication and technology at Stanford University, has done interesting work on identifying and understanding technological mediated communication. His contributions can certainly help visual ethnographers in this endeavour.

## Implications for Practice

Educational visual ethnographers should be cognizant that words can never be replaced and that images must be accompanied by a robust conversation between the researcher and the researched. One idea that resonated with this understanding was Pink's words when she observed "when people use photographs to tell stories about their experiences, identities,

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and practices these images become embedded in personally and culturally specific narratives” (Pink, 2013, p. 96). Educators interest in understanding how society and culture inform teaching and learning seems to be closely connected with what photos, videos, and drawings can offer in meaning-making. An implication of practice demands the recognition that though images represent experiences and ideas in a way that words cannot, they are not a superior medium (Pink, 2013). Indeed, while visuals bear an important relationship with words they cannot be replaced by any theoretical discussion.

Another key recommendation is to be aware of the three ways visuals may be incorporated: produced by the participants, produced by the ethnographer and co-produced by ethnographer and participant. On this same note, asking the participants to create images that not only represent their individual experiences collectively but those of their group in the form of participatory techniques gives room to engage in action across different communities and groups. Future practice requires a more in-depth look into collaborative visual ethnography since it emphasizes “on bringing together participants and researchers as co-creators of knowledge in order to develop authentic representations of the viewpoints, concerns and lived experiences of participants and communities” (O’Brien, Dhuffar, & Griffiths, 2014, p. 4).

Visual ethnography does not necessarily imply recording what we can see (Pink, 2013), there is much that educational researchers cannot see in the web-based method. There is too much-unseen information in virtual spaces and even in the traditional classroom. Though scepticism sticks its nose in any intention to see virtual spaces as natural settings, researchers are recommended to be open to using it as a way to be connected with participants. Technology offers increasing possibilities to incorporate images in research in an attempt to recognize people’s constructions of realities. There is an enormous effect of images on people’s construction of their realities, as people are genuinely immersed in a web-based visual world. However, in this fast-changing technology, researchers should not attempt to frame this method under one rigid guide; on the contrary, flexibility in action should allow for always-changing virtual visual ethnography.

## Final Thoughts

Visual ethnography is a rich path to capture human behavior. Educational researchers are invited to open their minds to the plethora of methodologies available; visual ethnography brings about the possibility to elicit rich and nuanced data that allows researchers to access students’ voices. The value of visual ethnography lies on the commitment of educational researchers to be in constant revision of possibilities that may bring new pathways to understanding and transformation. Judgment should also be exercised in selecting the approach and methods that best suit the research needs to seek for improvement of educational processes continuously. Regardless of the type of research and methods conducted, educational researchers’ path should evoke a search for the creation of spaces and conditions for the growth and in-depth



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understanding of educational communities. Although this path is ongoing, ever-changing, challenging and unclear at times, by analyzing the possibilities discussed in this essay, represent a step in the course of action, and an invitation to endeavor in this discussion and practice.

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