LSLP Micro-Paper 89: Urban Ethnography

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Defining the Term

Over the years, understanding the complexity of life in our cities has been a topic of concern for social and educational scientists. Researchers need to immerse themselves in those places to describe them better. That was the initial goal of ethnography. However, as our cities have become increasingly more complex and fluid in social, geographical, and linguistic terms, it is not enough to go and immerse oneself in these spaces. Life experience within the city has become the basis for constructing how we study it and make sense of what happens there.

This is the primary goal of urban ethnography, to take a closer look at the different tensions in the cities by capturing the voices and images and the researchers' positionalities as inhabitants and members of these communities. Urban ethnography, therefore, recognizes the rapid shifts and flows that happen in our cities, changes that include new ways to look at cultural manifestations, the roles of the different communities that are finding niches there, and even the other languages at play and how they transform the urban landscapes. Recent efforts in urban ethnography even acknowledge that we cannot understand life in our cities just by conceiving the city (or urban spaces for that matter) as the physical (i.e., the *urbs*). Instead, we are more aware of the hybrid condition of our cities and their denizens as mixing physical and digital/virtual spaces to create different layers of inhabiting.

Finally, from a larger socio-critical perspective, urban ethnography takes distance from more conventional views of ethnography, where researchers needed to navigate the emic/etic as part of their analysis. In this sense, we align with ideas of urban ethnography concerned with describing, interpreting, and helping solve societal issues in our cities. Researchers cannot simply go and explain topics like migration, poverty, or gentrification and not be part of solving these issues. Urban ethnography, from this perspective, means assuming the social responsibility of research to be an agent of positive change in our communities.

Connecting it to LSLP

At LSLP, we chose to use urban ethnography in our City as Literacy studies as the outcome of our growth and evolution as a research team. As our research keeps showing, there are different areas of literacies research that intertwine with urban ethnography. Social media practices, language exchange events, and queer critical literacies, to name three areas of our work, are happening in our cities. Members of all these communities rely on all the languages at their disposal to impact our cities.

The second area of connection to our research intends to explore further how the lessons we learn through urban ethnography can inform curricular and pedagogical practices in schools and, eventually, the different language learning initiatives that we see taking place in the city at the informal and government levels.

Expanding Second Language Research

We have always grounded our research in second language research and education. As second language researchers keep turning their attention to the city through ideas such as translanguaging or metrolingualism, using urban ethnography as a methodological possibility can help ground these studies in the realities of these communities and take their experiences using languages as the basis for more robust research ideas and more innovative teaching practices.

References

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