

Telling Stories From The Field?
(A discussion of an ethnographic approach to
researching the teaching of physical education)

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Introduction

In this chapter I describe an approach to research that I characterise as 'ethnographic'. I want to persuade you that such research celebrates the sharing of stories. The chapter draws on my experience of research with five teachers of boys' physical education in two secondary schools over a period of three years.

I do not want the term 'ethnographic' to get in our way, for the moment, so I propose to tell you a story about a lesson that one of the teachers, Bob, taught in March 1986. My idea is to use the story as a trigger for my characterisation of ethnographic research.

Anush and Basketball-Fever

Tuesday afternoons meant one thing in particular for 2J - forty minutes of basketball with Bob. Teacher and pupils seemed to be excited by this timetabled encounter. In the other single physical education lesson in their school week, Bob focussed on skills and drills. Tuesdays were the days for cramming as many games as possible into the time available.

On this particular March afternoon, the end of the term is looming. On the last few Tuesdays, games have become more accomplished and exhibited a high degree of involvement. When I arrive, shortly after two o'clock, thirteen members of the class are already in the gym playing informal games of basketball in a mix of half-court, whole-court figurations. They have come upon a treasure trove of basketballs in the store cupboard and are making the most of their unexpected bounty.

Bob walks in a few minutes later. The boys of 2J and I look at him apprehensively. In the past, they have been 'told off' for entering the gym before his arrival. On one occasion, I had been in the gym when another group had been sent out - I had been there as an 'observer' and noted at the time the ambivalence of my position.

But today, there is no retribution.

There's no need for a whistle or command. The flurry of game activity has halted. I suppose that is what some of the prescriptive, how-to-teach texts call 'presence'. Attention is focussed on Bob.

In a clear voice, he says **"Right, come in and sit down."** Once the group is collected he asks where the rest of the group is.

"They have been to swimming club and they're late back", a number of boys report.

Bob looks at the assembled group and emphasises the kit requirements for basketball. From my vantage point there seems total compliance. (Mind you, earlier in January, I had been in a lesson when Bob pointed out to a pupil that white socks rather than no socks were required for indoor lessons.) He follows kit comments with news of this evening's basketball club which is open to second, third and fourth years, **"How many of you are coming tonight?"**.

As hands go down and the whispers about the club abate, Bob draws the class's attention to a mat under one of the basket backboards, **"Take care there, that's covering a hole in the floor."**

He organises the class into teams and divides them into 'shirts' and 'skins', 7 v 6. In the usual way of things, the fattest boy in the group, Anush, is in the skin team. He seems reluctant to take his shirt off which does not surprise me. A couple of weeks earlier I had helped Bob with the half-yearly fitness testing and measurement. When I came to do a skinfold test of Anush's waist, I found it difficult to give a reading (as it happened, I 'invented' one near to his previous measurement from the Autumn Term).

But Anush does take his shirt off and takes his place on court. The first game starts fifteen minutes into the lesson. At the tip off, Bob reminds the boys about the contact rule and recaps, quickly, the foul acknowledgement procedure.

Almost immediately, 'shirts' have a shot at the basket. **"Beautiful shot"**, is Bob's response. Within a short time, it is an animated game with all the boys calling for the ball when their team has possession. Some of the boys exhibit tactical sophistication whilst others seem to respond to the scale of the court and the size of the ball by passing backwards.

Bob whistles loudly and the game halts immediately. **"Stop. There's too much unproductive calling."** He dramatises the kind of calling that has been going on. **"Let's have five minutes of silent basketball. No calling, just use your eyes and get into space to receive the ball [...] and help the ball carrier."**

The game is resumed. Bob starts a commentary:

"Bad luck, bad luck" as a shot hits the rim of the basket.

"Good cut, David."

Then in a loud voice, **"I haven't seen a one-two yet."**

The game is evenly contested. Bob has stage managed the selection to make this outcome a probability. Four minutes into the game, the shirts score the first basket and then a second. **"Oh [...] beautiful"**.

One of the better players tries an ambitious pass which is intercepted and is greeted by Bob's even-handed response:

"Unlucky, Ollie [...] well nicked."

The game is still a silent one, except for the teams' cheers on scoring.

There is a clumsy challenge shortly after 'skins' score the third basket. Bob stops the game with a whistle and then says, **"bad luck, Dave."** Dave puts his hand up to acknowledge his foul. Bob's teaching and Channel 4's coverage of basketball seem to be paying dividends!

The game has been going seven minutes, latecomers to the lesson have filtered discretely into the gym and have taken their place on the wallbars. Bob whistles the game to an end, **"Just hold it still. That was good play [...] you must still maintain urgency even though there is no noise."** He proceeds to give feedback about the game.

The eleven latecomers are divided into two teams. These two teams, 'shirts' v 'skins', take the court for the second game. Meanwhile, the original thirteen take to the wallbars as spectators. Bob starts the game and continues his commentary of play:

"Good" [...]

"Brilliant pass" [...]

"Madness at the moment" [...].

The game has been going for two minutes when one of the 'skins' is fouled whilst shooting. Bob whistles the foul, stops the game and explains the free throw procedure following a foul whilst shooting. There is less than complete attention from the spectators on the wallbars so Bob whistles and waits momentarily for silence.

The boy who was fouled takes his free shots but misses both of them. The game continues for another three minutes until 'skins' score a late winning basket. Bob whistles the end of the game and organises the third game.

"Right, winners stay on and play shirts from game one." As the 'shirts' scramble onto the court, Bob adds a latecomer to the shirts team. A hectic, four-minute game of basketball ensues. Normal commentary is resumed:

"Take a foul there" [...]

"Shot, Jamie, 1-0" [...]

As Bob announces **"Last minute"**, 'skins' score a second basket.

By design or good luck, his timing with exhortation is impeccable for as he says **"Thirty seconds"**, 'shirts' score their first basket. This is greeted by **"Oh, tremendous"**.

Bob whistles to end the game. The boys leave the court to his observation **"What a great game of basketball that was."**

The last game of the lesson is organised. Anush's team are slow off the mark and remain as 'skins' for the game. There are four minutes of 'normal time' left.

The teams from game three who served up such a 'great game of basketball' are dismissed as Bob sets up game four.

"Rest of you [...] buzz off." As they leave the gym for the changing rooms, those on and off court are told **"Quiet for the start."**

One of the talented players in the 'shirts' team, Matt, scores twice in a minute. Bob's response is **"Oh, magnificent."**

There is frantic activity. Bob whistles for a halt in proceedings. **"Don't all converge on the basket"**. He asks the pupils to think back to previous games when they have worked on play around the basket.

The game restarts with a lot of activity but no scoring. In the last minute of the game, one of the quieter and less involved boys is hit in the face by a stray pass. The game stops briefly for a damage report. Bob checks that no harm has been done and says

"That's why we have to catch the ball."

In the last moments of the game, in true Boys' Own fashion, Anush receives a pass near the basket. For the first time in the lesson, he declines to pass and... he scores to everyone's delight. That is the end of the game.

As the boys leave the gym, Anush asks Bob about the basketball club, **"is it still on?"**

The boys from game four have three minutes to change. Bob chivvies them along.

Outside it is raining. Bob has Fourth Year games and will be taking Sevens practice. Almost half of 2J will be back in ninety minutes for basketball club. It must sound contrived, but Anush will be one of the first in the gym after school. This time he will keep his tee shirt firmly on.

About the Story

I wonder what you made of the story. It took me three years to write and is based on my knowledge of Bob as a teacher and my understanding of his class 2J.

An essential characteristic of ethnographic research is the time taken to get to know people and settings. In my case, I visited Bob's school for a whole term and saw him teach 2J ten times in 1986. Thereafter I visited Bob regularly for a further three years to talk about teaching physical

education. Our conversations were based on our shared knowledge of each other and of classes such as 2J.

Some writers regard this kind of getting to know people and settings over a period of time as 'participant observation'. I prefer to describe it as 'being around'. We are all accomplished at being around people and places.

Telling you about a lesson is a bit like being shown someone else's holiday photographs! But on the whole, ethnographers do try to provide readers with background information. Perhaps you would like some more background information about my research with five teachers.

I have already mentioned how long my research has taken. Let me tell you about the two schools involved. One was a co-educational, 11-16 comprehensive school and the other was a boys' 11-18 independent school. My choice of schools (and their choice of me) indicates a second feature of ethnographic research. Such research is usually undertaken by one researcher in a small number of locations. In the two schools there were five full-time teachers of boys' physical education (three in the comprehensive school and two in the independent school). These five teachers are the central characters in my story of the teaching of boys' physical education in the secondary school.

To give you a sense of how small scale my research was, let me share with you that in 1988 there were 16,748 qualified male physical education teachers in the maintained secondary sector. Given I had chosen to base part of my story on three of these teachers, I calculated that my 'sample' constituted 0.018% of the available teachers.

You will have noticed that I referred to the teacher in the story I told you as Bob. I gave each of the five teachers a pseudonym. It was hard giving them new names! I also used pseudonyms for the schools. I eventually came to call the comprehensive school Bridgetown and the independent school Riverside. My research contract with the schools was explicit in relation to anonymity and confidentiality.

In order to locate the work of the five teachers in the two schools, I spent some considerable time researching the history of both schools in addition to familiarising myself with their day-to-day running. To do this I sought out documentary evidence. Some ethnographic studies make use of confidential files to which privileged access has been granted. I decided only to use those documents that were in a wider public domain. I found newspaper articles, school prospectuses, guides to prospective parents, school magazines and headteachers' reports to governing bodies valuable sources of information.