

Ethnography with Intercultural Competence and Visual Thinking for Real Life Problem Solving

Sukjin KANG

Faculty of Business Management, Korea Aerospace University,
Goyang City, Gyeonggi-do 10540, South Korea

and

Seungryul LEE

Faculty of English, Korea Aerospace University,
Goyang City, Gyeonggi-do 10540, South Korea

ABSTRACT

This paper studies the positive effect of ethnographic methods in natural environments, and the significance of symbolic interpretation of research by adopting Viktor Chklovski's conception, defamiliarization. This literary term is reoriented here to overcoming learned helplessness through direct contact and intensive face-to-face involvement with research subjects as a way to reach self-actualization.

This paper explores the influence of culture and the necessity of fostering intercultural competence in face-to-face interpersonal encounters. Contextual intelligence, the ability to understand the limits of knowledge and to adapt knowledge to an environment different from the one in which it was developed, must all be considered to establish richer heuristics based upon ethnographic research.

Additionally, it studies the power of visual thinking in an inspiration space and an ideation space in which every possible source of idea is explored. By merging visual thinking with ethnography, we can effectively capture the hidden nature of the research subjects and realize our utmost potentials.

Keywords: Visual Thinking, Ethnography, Problem Solving, Intercultural Competence, Scribble Sketching, Defamiliarization

1. INTRODUCTION

"Well, I am not a good drawer." This is a frequent response from the students we teach when we first ask them to get into the field and sketch their experience. In South Korea, sketch activities are hardly found at the university level except in some art classes. Frightened facial expressions are understandable, for this is probably the only class that requires a sketch at my university. We try to reduce their burden by giving just one simple principle: observe with sympathy. "We do not ask for any piece of art. What you need to do is to look with your heart and capture the wonderful or terrible life experiences around you." Through this experience we have found that frequently the insight these sketches provide goes beyond a detailed verbal description.

It is an exciting experience to start an academic paper in a new ethnographic way, for this kind of writing awakens a certain perplexity and confusion. As John Dewey points out, perplexity, confusion, and doubt are the right starting points for the solution

to any problem [1]. Instead of the linear movement of reading, ethnography encourages iterative and non-consecutive reading, constantly deferring the final judgment. This seemingly complex and unorganized form can thus be more fruitful and appropriate to lead reflective thinking than the typical academic form based upon a grand narrative.

This paper will explore the significance of ethnographical research by adopting the conception of defamiliarization. Ethnography opens a new way to investigate human desire, motivation, and behavior. Currently it has been widely used to find and solve daily real life problems with the development of less time and energy consuming tools like Rapid CD. Yet, in adopting ethnographic tools within the entire problem solving process, cultural difference is frequently ignored and its effect is significantly reduced. This paper suggests that to foster contextual intelligence is significant for its users. It also proposes to use the power of visual thinking in ethnographic research, for the scribble sketch can be as effective as thick descriptions. Ultimately, this paper contributes to real life problem solving by suggesting more comprehensive and sophisticated heuristics.

2. RUSSIAN FORMALISM REVISITED FOR PROBLEM SOLVING

People are often trapped by repeated failed behaviors and by assigning incorrect blame. Instead of attributing a failed behavior to an inappropriate condition, people are likely to blame themselves for their inability or carelessness. This is so called "learned helplessness" [2]. We are so accustomed to our unfavorable circumstances which result in repeated failure that we stop trying to improve the given situation. We may even become unwilling to study it. People take an exposure to danger or the inconvenience naturally, and do not even notice the problem itself. In other words, we have learned helplessness after repeated failure and become familiarized with bad situations. A Russian formalist's literary term is worth adopting here. Viktor Chklovski attempts to distinguish poetic language from ordinary language through his coined word, defamiliarization in "Art as Device" [3]. Chklovski emphasizes the function of the artistic device that presents common things in an unfamiliar way in order to get out of daily practical use of language.

In contrast, we propose to use defamiliarization for every day practical purposes, defamiliarizing the familiar to get out of an anchoring trap. Ethnography invites reflective thinking in the

process of interpretation, which tears down a stereo-typed mindset. This break is possible mainly because ethnography does not depend on a grand narrative in which the heterogeneity of individual experience has been largely deleted. As Clifford Geertz points out, "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance that he himself has spun" [4]. According to Geertz, man's behavior is comparable to that of a spider in that they both spin thick webs. These thick webs look like a puzzle in which a new meaning can be found and created. As Balinese cockfights provide a puzzle of the life of Balei in their symbolic forms, ethnographical research offers us a moment of puzzlement and a sense of wonder arising from our daily lives. Like a man who just arrives at a foreign island, the territory of ethnography enables us to explore new meanings of our behavior by defamiliarizing the familiar.

Defamiliarization in this ethnographic context, we propose, means to lead a eudaimonian life, or to develop one's best potentials and to be an outlier through B-motivation [5]. To get out of the fixed mindset requires our willingness and capacity to focus upon our research subject with sympathy and understanding and get insight from observation and interaction with B-values such as richness, beauty, and goodness. To have a taken-for-granted mindset and to stay in our comfort zone impede our B-motivation of finding real life problems around us and possible solutions. A neat statistical survey often leads to a lack of our attention by eradicating the hidden meanings of everyday occurrences and human behavior. A real insight arises from a non-linear, non-grand, localized discourse rather than codified numeralization or typical generalization. Defamiliarization, in this sense, refuses to produce a well-aligned, standardized research activities in order to find meaningful problems and solutions in diverse everyday events with an ethnographic mindset. Ethnography, in brief, invites us to see the familiar with unfamiliar eyes and suggests an outlet for learned helplessness. Additionally, it encourages us to explore our human potential for self-actualization by contacting the bigger world and having meaningful problem solving experiences.

3. CULTIVATING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Observation in natural environments without any intentional arrangement is crucial in ethnographical research. Here we would enlarge the conception of encounter in a collective way in problem solving. Culture can be defined as "the way in which a group of people solves problems" [6]. Applying similar criteria and norms to the process of problem solving will reduce effectiveness in cross-bordered situations. The neglect of cultural difference and context often results in detecting incorrect problems or proposing wrong answers.

One useful tool widely used in problem solving is the double diamond model of design developed by the British Design Council. This model is particularly useful in detecting real problems and finding a variety of possible solutions before the convergence step in the human-centered design process. The double diamond model and similar problem solving models adopting ethnography have mostly been developed in the UK and America, where universalism is dominant. Universalism presupposes that a certain established rules and principles can be applied to every individual situation. Yet in countries where particularism is predominant, including Korea, Nepal, and Venezuela, a universalist solution or heuristic may run into particularist problems. In the countries whose cultural climate is universal, an analytical mode is frequently more prevalent than a synthetic mode. Thus this paper suggests that the double diamond

model needs remodeling for application to countries where a synthetic mode of thinking is relatively dominant.

Additionally, it is noticeable that both British and American cultures have a key path worked out in advance, with times for the completion of every step in the process of problem solving. This sequential solution is not effective in countries in which a polychronic way of life is dominant if strictly applied [7]. In some countries, including Japan, in which the just-in-time solution was developed, a synchronic or polychronic pattern of solution cannot be totally absent, even in stage by stage linear solution process. This magnitude of time horizons, in addition, should be considered, for British and Americans have shorter time horizons than Koreans, Japanese, and Swedes have.

Instead of applying the same format to different cultural groups, a flexible distribution of divergent thinking processes and convergent thinking processes in problem solving, without ignoring time horizons, is desirable considering cultural gap. Different groups of people have developed different ways of problem solving. Applying exactly the same tools and the same heuristics may waste time and energy, greatly reducing the effect of the ethnography.

4. ADOPTING THINKING IN IMAGE SKILLS

A broader concern for art significantly enhances nurturing the capacity for problem solving. As Rudolph Arnheim points out, visual perception and thinking are indivisibly intertwined and perception necessarily involves problem solving [8]. Unfortunately nurturing perceptual thinking has been largely ignored at the Korean collegiate level, and art has been restricted to representation, style, or decoration. Above all, visualization is an effective way of detecting problems and suggesting solutions. People can visually record what they have noticed, as ethnographers describe what they have seen in a natural context. Here seeing involves observation from the mind's eyes with sympathy. This way of seeing is comparable to rapport building in ethnography. Sketching enables people to focus on the subject they explore.

Sketching is one of the most powerful tools for finding critical issues and generating creative ideas. Art, in this regard, needs to be placed as an essential position in higher education, because productive and creative activities are indispensable in the process of problem solving. Edward de Bono finds that a child can generate more creative and diverse ideas than an adult, mainly because a child is good at using heuristics, a thought acquired from probing and trial and errors rather than logical inference or knowledge. In his book, *Children Solve Problems*, lots of intuitive sketches from 5 to 13 year old children are introduced when they solve real life problems such as 'Stop a Cat and a Dog Fighting,' 'Invent a Sleep Machine,' and 'Improve the Human Body' [9].

In professional areas, sketching has been mostly used by designers, yet it can be used as an effective tool for any reflective practitioner who attempts to solve our real life problems, as Bill Buxton suggests [10]. Sketching is an excellent research and idea-generation tool, for it is inclusive, easy to add or subtract an idea, and easy to recognize the observed subject within the broader context. Sketching enables us to see the world differently despite our limited knowledge and experience. Like thick description, sketches do not specify everything, thus encourage diverse interpretations which cannot be easily captured by quantitative tools.

The educational system has largely ignored the power of sketching, which should be fully restored as an invaluable

research tool in higher education. We found that one of the easiest yet fruitful ways to encourage using sketches at collegiate level is finding natural mapping and feedback. Students frequently sketched the mismatch between the controls and the objects to be controlled, and rearranged the controls in effective ways even without the knowledge of natural mapping. They, additionally, captured the lack of immediate feedback which made them irritated and annoyed in their sketchbook, and offered appropriate and timely solutions in images.

Through scribble sketching, we can rapidly search for and try out various ideas from the world around us. Employing sketching in the early stages of the problem solving process is particularly effective when generating multiple wild ideas are required. In order to establish a better heuristic model in real life problem solving, sketching can be adopted along with thick description. When we face a creative solving situation, both tools encourage us to get out of a fixed thought pattern and to find diverse possible answers. Through thick description and sketching we can get out of the cult of the average in which positive outliers are deleted by statistics and can fully explore new possibilities.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Thinking in images, rapport building relationship in ethnographic research, and practicing scribble sketching all require training of right brain. Daniel Pink proclaims that right-brainers will rule the future in his book, *A Whole New Mind*. He notices the significance of design, story, symphony, empathy, play, and meaning as well as function, argument, focus, logic, seriousness, and accumulation. And in the “Conceptual Age” which requires creators and empathizers, more attention and training should be given to empathy, meaning, and design [11]. This paper suggests emergent sketching rather than deliberate design can be more effective in identifying real problems and generating creative solutions. It defamiliarizes the widely accepted norms and shatters conventional viewpoints.

Scribble sketches and thick description do not simply represent a new reality but create it. In this regard, this new era requires restoring thinking in images, for scribbling invites curiosity, inquiry, and profound reinterpretation. They are meaningful sources of personal growth and the realization of our utmost potential. The prevailing education system in Korea has been measured by short-term metrics, devaluated intangibles, and focused upon dedicating people to mediocrity instead of encouraging them to be outliers. In this mindset, things that cannot be measured by number have been devalued. Yet, these unmeasurable things in sketching and thick description are, in fact, keys to reaching self-development and eudaimonian happiness.

Thick description, visual thinking, and scribble sketching are effective tools to solve problems, for they all encourage our imagination and defer decision making. Cultivating cultural intelligence should be considered to increase the effectiveness of the problem solving process. The difference of a shared interaction between members of organizations should not be ignored. By elaborating creative problem tools like scribble sketching and fostering contextual intelligence, ethnography can provide a more effective heuristic to contemporary practitioners who attempt to solve real life problems and to explore their full human potential.

6. REFERENCES

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