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An epistemology of distance

Ethnography of training activities: engineering and management in higher education organizations

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Abstract

I first present a current fieldwork in distance education engineering and its results (2011-2013) and compare them to previous more exotic studies (in an Amazonian tribe, 2001; in new economy start ups, 2000-2004; about bullfighting (2007-2011).

I then launch a discussion about the question of distance:

1. Cultural distance to the fieldwork. What is seen first (when one is a stranger)? What is seen after a few months (when one gets socialized)?
2. Distance to oneself in higher education: how to regularly take a “step back” to observe and describe? How to become an observer who is distant to one’s own world?
3. Distance to research community: what is the optimal distance in the researcher’s description, taking into account his potential readers and their closeness to the subject?

As a conclusion, I propose a 3D model combining the measure of these three distances.

Key words

Distance – ethnography – education engineering – epistemology – fieldwork

A study in a higher education

Personal research background

I have been trained in field study methods at Ecole normale supérieure and Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris, France. I have completed short participatory observations: in north Guyana, in the Amazonian rainforest where I studied the construction of canoes by an indigenous tribe at the Maroni river bank (Marty, 2002a). My focus was the activity of the workers in different work situations: first chopping down the tree in the forest and then carving the trunk in the canoes harbor, next to the village. Later, I came back to France to study new economy and high tech Start Ups operating in the field of numeric edition (Marty, 2002b). I was closer to sociology of work, trying to describe the socialization of a freshly hired employee (I was working part time and had declared to the management that I was doing a social sciences enquiry) and writing down the story of the organization from inside (the company lasted for 9 months before going almost bankrupt).

After this master degree in research, I enrolled in a French “grande école” to acquire management skills. I dedicated my final year dissertation to the subject of ethnography within companies (Marty, 2004). It is a French dissertation available online¹, and frames this presentation since most of its epistemological considerations are still valid while studying higher education as an organization (Trowler, 2012: *Doing Insider Research in Universities*). The question of distance to the field is raised in this dissertation; one of the notions that I will be developing later in this contribution.

In 2011, I defended a PhD in ethics about bullfighting. This might seem to be exotic but it is not, at least in my point of view. I grew up in South West of France (next to Spain), where I got involved in many amateur bullfighting activities. My research was mainly a compulsion of readings about bullfighting values and field data: participation to *corridas* and *fiestas*, and interviews.

I am now an employee of higher education public institution, occupying the position of a manager/engineer in distance education. But I’m also, as a leisure, a researcher within a research center on adult training (CRF, belonging to Conservatoire national des arts et

¹ <http://olivier.marty.voila.net> : through the link to my Google Scholar web page

métiers, Paris), where I am preparing an “habilitation à diriger les recherches” (research direction habilitation) in education sciences.

A study on distance education engineering

Since 2011, I have written six papers about distance education among which two (Marty, 2012, a&b) are dedicated to education engineering and one is about distance education management (Marty, 2012c). The first and the third articles have been presented orally in a seminar at Conservatoire national des arts et métiers (and archived by the institution here: <http://educations.voila.net>). The second article, written in English, is a working paper archived on the website of Centre national de recherche scientifique (Cnrs). In these documents, I have presented distance education engineering both as an activity and a project. It is about conceiving curricula in order to train students and adjusting an education software to meet national diploma requirements.

Among the results, I am presenting a three dimensional typology of scholars, elaborated using the analysis of criteria for the selection of French university teachers (the raw material was presented on the national website for the recruitment in 2012).

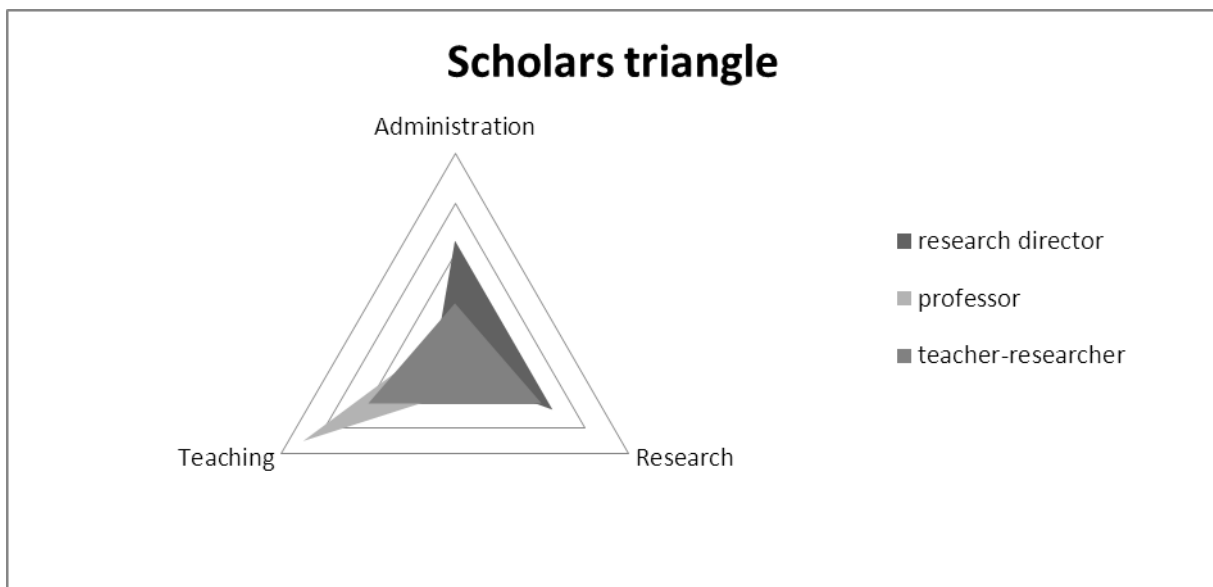
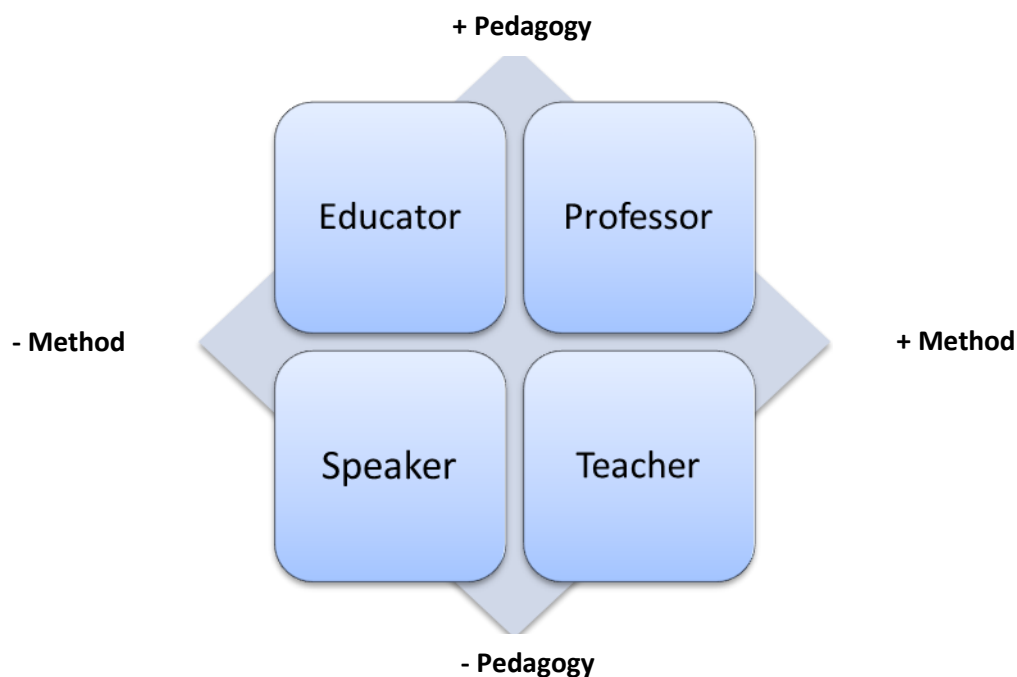


Figure 1

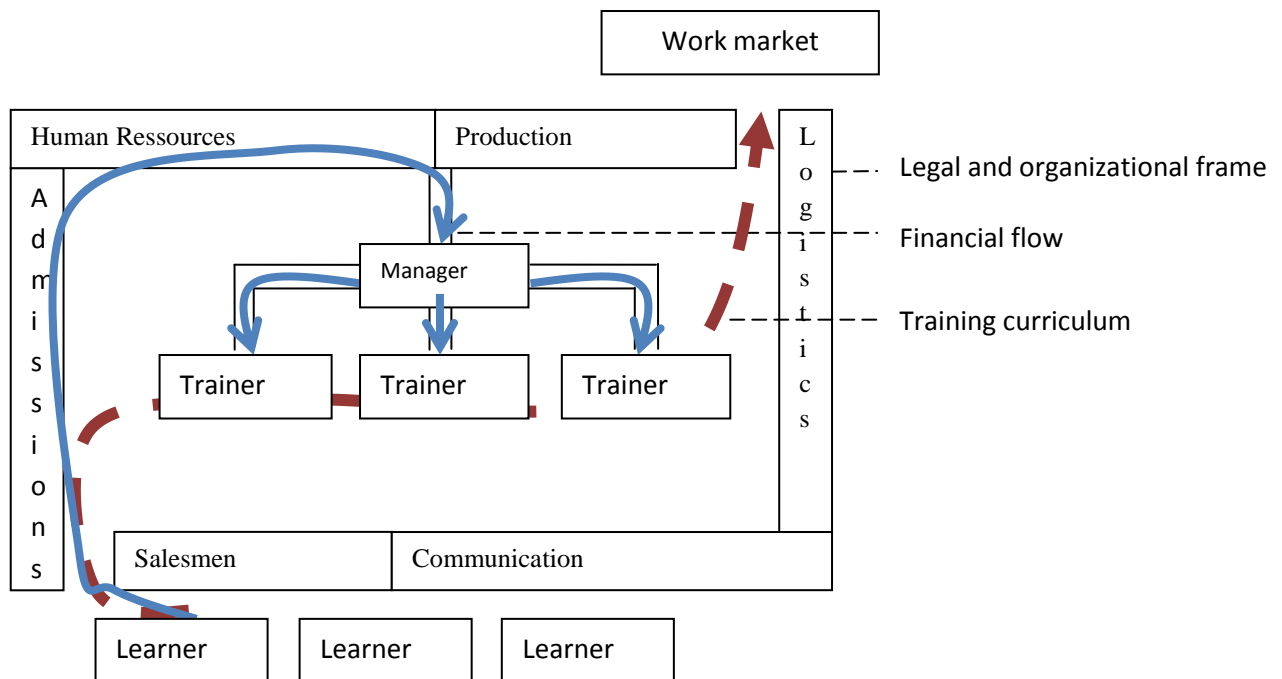
Another result is a typology of didactic figures : different actors in higher education are classified on two dimensions – method and pedagogy, justified by their very etymology.

Indeed *pedagogy* comes from then ancient Greek (paideia : children / gogein : to lead) and includes the idea of guidance as well as *method* includes the idea of content of the course (a common etymology is mathein : to learn / hodos : path). Therefore the educator accompanying the student is opposed to the teacher delivering knowledge. The professor has a theses two qualities whereas the mere speaker has not.



Didactic types (Figure 2)

Last but not least, the comparison of my current higher education public institution with a private one (specialized in professional education) led to a diagram of the organization of the public institution (defined as a set of complementary organs) :



Education organism (Figure 3)

However the point here is not to present results but to develop epistemological considerations regarding the finding process. I will therefore stress the difficulties I encountered and the solutions I opted for.

I will attempt to summarize three kinds of epistemology considerations around the notion of distance : distance to field, distance to oneself, distance to research community. In all the cases, I will try to measure this distance, or at least to quantify it. I therefore take for granted the notion of continuity from insider to outsider as proposed by Justine Mercer in 2007 in *The challenges of insider research in educational institutions*.

Distance to field

The first distance I want to stress is the cultural distance to the fieldwork. This is the reason why I started with my personal research background : in my enquiries, I went progressively from very exotic studies (a huge distance separated me from the Djuka indigenous) to more or less common distance in modern social sciences (new economy companies, south-west Europe bullfighters) to an endogenous study within a higher education institution (distance education engineering).

This decreasing distance entails a first methodological consideration: when the researcher is an apparent foreigner (the only European person with a notebook and a pen in a Djukas tribe speaking “talkie-talkie”), he/she naturally declares his enquiry. This enquiry is not necessarily understood but it is visible. However, if the researcher is among colleagues in higher education, with the same cultural background and conception of science, he/she is much less visible. One can therefore be tempted not to declare one’s enquiry. This might be done in order to keep the observed from changing their habits to appear what they would like to be. Furthermore, it prevents them from influencing the researcher’s study (because they might be interested in science and have their own point of view, because they want to use this study as a communication tool and so on...). The first bias of insiders is therefore methodological: since one is invisible, one is tempted not to declare himself/herself and collect different data.

Being an insider researcher, doing an endogenous study, has another consequence dealing with the notion of visibility. As French researchers of the previous generation have shown it (for example Bourdieu, 1984), when one is too close to his field, one may not see what is evident. A foreign ethnographer can see the “big picture”, the frame, since everything is strange to him. He will naturally spot the way people are dressed, their notion of time, of space,... since he is looking from far away, with a lot of distance. On the opposite, an insider is so used to his own world, he looks at it from such a short distance, that he or she is blind to many features. Being an insider makes many dimensions of the field natural and invisible.

However, distance is not necessarily set once and for all. Indeed, as the research process progresses, the researcher tends to get closer to his field. I approached the indigenous

tribe, progressively understanding their language, their social codes, accepting their work rituals – thus getting closer and closer to them. On the other hand, if one studies his/her colleagues' work, one will have to try and take a step back to be more distant to one's habits. As a conclusion for this part, the research work is progressive and the distance variable: one doesn't see the same things at the beginning and at the end of the field – this is why writing down regularly allows to keep track of this change of focus.

How can one measure this distance to the fieldwork? It is a difficult task but there are a few criteria that allows to quantify this distance: what is the previous experience of the researcher (is one's familial or personal background near from the field studied? what were the previous field studies in his research career?). Another criteria is the time spent on field: the longer it is, the closer the researcher gets to his field. Here times shall not necessarily be seen as a pure quantitative linear progression: it is also qualitative and certain moments count twice since twice more elements are noted or major interviews are done. Until the point the researcher belongs to the field and then arises another problem: how to be distant to oneself when oneself is closed to be an indigenous?

Distance to oneself

As mentioned earlier, I am currently employed in higher education as a manager and in my leisure as a researcher belonging to a laboratory in education sciences. These parallel activities can be difficult since I sometimes wonder if I am an actor or a spectator in my daily activities. I sometimes hesitate on the point of view that I should adopt. To quote P. Trowler (2012, empl. 592), the exercise is to “render the normal strange”, and sometimes it feels strange to be the researcher who is trying to do an auto-ethnography. To overcome this I try and divide the day in two parts : work time in my work space for work activities ; leisure and research at home. Thus, there is no confusion in my mind.

However, I notice that the more hierarchy there is between work and leisure the less confusion there is in one's mind. Distances effects are produced by inversion of the hierarchy or when there is an equal effort on both activities (when I spend as much time working as writing for my researches). Distance to oneself is therefore quantifiable as well as the distance to the field. It is a combination of distance to field and distance to research.

Usually I maintain the following hierarchy: first my job as a training engineer and second my leisure as a researcher. A consequence regarding epistemology (cf. Marty, 2004, last chapter), is that participating is at least as important as observing. It is about participating first, then observing (reflecting once back home) and finally writing down regularly not to forget. Instead of a participatory observation, it is rather an observatory participation. This is important since, the researcher will not see the same things: being part of the action, he sees the actors' interests and strategies, and can present his/her own strategy as an actor – as stressed by a researcher in organization sciences (Crozier, 1981). What would be invisible to a mere spectator is accessible to the actor. It is about objectification of one's subjectivity.

To sum up, participating actively and taking a step back daily, to reflect at home, can be seen in three ways

- as two parallel activities, as I try to maintain them in my current position
- as divergent activities: when it comes to financing one's research, a paid employee in education is a limitation due to legal constraints
- as convergent activities : a long term field study at work allows the outsider to see inner strategies and details that are too precise

In conclusion, there is a distance to oneself, a distance between the two parallel lines of activities. Let's now observe the distance to research community.

Distance to research community

Up till now, I mainly focused on the production of ethnographic material. Let's now consider the audience of this research.

The main audience is the scientific community. The production of field data is an answer to the demand of a French laboratory of education sciences. This demand is embedded within international trends of research. Therefore, when I take my daily notes, when I present them orally in a seminar or in a conference, when I publish an article or a book, I expect to reach a scientific public. As an amateur I am helped since I went through elitist French institutions that give credit to the researches in France. They amplify and give authority to

them. Moreover, doing my field in an education institution (even though not as a researcher) strengthens the academic position.

Here lies a possibility to measure the distance to the audience. Indeed, answers to questions such as the following ones give a hint of the distance to the research community: has the institution studied a laboratory? a research review (this is the case for the one I studied) and is it well known and established within the research community? What are the disciplines taught by the institution studied and are education sciences included? The time spent doing researches outside the fields (daily readings, attending monthly seminars, regular notes and oral presentations) is also a way to quantify this distance, and again time is not smooth since certain moments have a huge value (insights, fruitful discussions...)

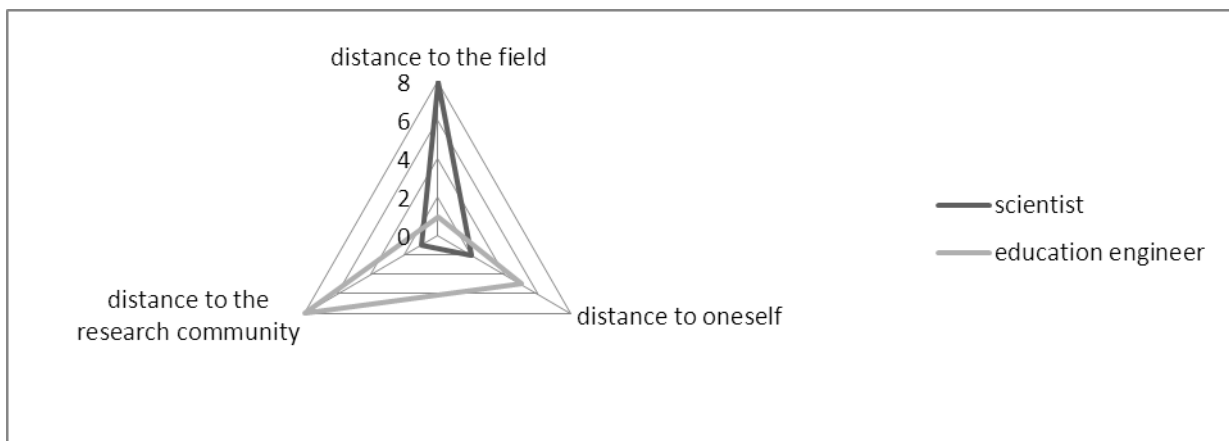
The main difficulty lies on the distance I have to adopt when I present my work: I have to guess what the reader is supposed to know about the topic I am writing about. When I studied the Djuka tribe, I wrote a general chapter about the tribe (a review of literature). But when I write about an education institution, it is sometimes delicate to present it: is it publicity? Do I have to quote administrative science? What is, in this case, the interest of a general description since the scientists are close to this institution and already know about it? Thus, I have to adjust the distance; zooming in or out to have the proper focus relative to the reader.

Another audience that I have presented in the beginning is the very institution being studied. Djukas never sent me a letter to complain about my work published on the Internet and concerning their habits. But distance education higher managers did. They wanted to control it. A similar experience occurred with a Start Up that I studied: even though I tried to have an anonymous case study, a high tech company manager recognized his company and complained about it. His argument was that it was not scientific: to his eyes, science involved physics, machines such as a microscope or, at least for social sciences, computers and quantitative data. In the case of the higher education institution, closer to social sciences qualitative method, my work has been judged mainly regarding its utility. But the question of being a scientific discovery or not has been raised, due to my main professional status. That is an epistemology question: is science made only by professional scientist or is there room for qualified amateurs? The answer seems to be linked to the distance between paid and leisure activities: the more separated they are, the less confusion of interest they involve, the more positively the amateur is regarded.

Conclusion: measuring distances

The description of this field study in education engineering and management led me to three kinds of epistemology analysis: distance to field, distance to oneself and distance to research community. I showed power relationships and symbolic violence that were also developed by ethnographers of science (Latour, 1986).

I want to finish by combining the measure of these distances. I am presenting a three dimensions model to position two profiles of researchers – the ideal being at the intersection of the two triangles, that is to say reducing the distances.



Measuring the distances : two profiles (Figure 4)²

² We can measure distance with the unique parameter of time :
D = distance to field = it decreases when time on field increases.
d = distance to research community = it decreases when time spent doing researches increases.
d/D = distance to oneself, a score near 1 is harder to maintain on the long run

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