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ABSTRACT

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VERY SPECIAL-NATIVES:
THE EVOLVING ROLE OF TEACHERS
AS INFORMANTS IN EDUCATIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

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Abstract

Underlying the current use of ethnography in the study of teaching and learning is the assumption of an analogy between the school or classroom and culture. The claim of educational ethnography is that it discovers and describes the ways that members of the school community create and share meaning. Ethnographers aim to discover the operating knowledge that enables educators and students to navigate everyday life in schools. To document classroom life with any measure of completeness or validity, the ethnographer must consider both the social life of classrooms and the mental activities occasioned by social interaction. Teachers as the chief planners and purveyors of important occasions for learning in the classroom are in a unique position to observe, monitor, and reflect upon both social and academic change in the classroom. In this light, teachers are very special natives of the classroom community who can be important arbiters of the validity of educational ethnography and can even help to shape the course of ethnographic description.

VERY SPECIAL NATIVES: THE EVOLVING ROLE OF TEACHERS AS INFORMANTS IN EDUCATIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY¹

Susan Florio²

Introduction

In the last 10 years, much-studied American educators have been treated to a novel sort of inquiry into their problems and practices called "ethnography." While this kind of research may be new to the educational community, anthropologists point out that ethnography has a long history. Herodotus, in the fifth century B.C., traveled the Mediterranean world and chronicled social life there. He is often considered to be not only the first historian, but the first ethnographer. Like his modern counterparts, he tended to view communities holistically and to interpret human behavior in light of its social context. And, like contemporary fieldworkers, Herodotus gathered much of his information by means of first hand observation of social life.

Although modern fieldworkers resemble their predecessors in some important ways, ethnography has been influenced during its long history by changes in social, intellectual, and technological climates. Partly in virtue of the changes wrought by such a long life, ethnography does not presently lend itself to easy definition, to neat packaging as a set of research techniques, or to facile promises in its current application to

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the study of education (Hymes, Note 1). Yet in spite of the absence of easy definitions or promises, ethnographic research is being undertaken in the schools, and educators must reckon with it. Educators should be concerned with ethnography partly because, like other kinds of research into their practice, it may ultimately influence the institutional policies with which they must live. Perhaps more significantly, however, ethnography concerns educators because of the claims that it makes. For example, in Frake's (1964) terms,

an ethnography should be a theory of cultural behavior in a particular society, the adequacy of which is to be evaluated by the ability of a stranger to the culture (who may be the ethnographer) to use the ethnographer's statements as instructions for appropriately anticipating the scenes of the society. (p. 142)

In other words, the ethnographer is responsible to report, not a travelogue of life in the observed community, but a specification of what the members of that community must know in order to behave sensibly within it and to make sense of the behavior of others. To this end, the fieldworker must find out not only what is going on in the community, but what the goings on mean to the participants, and what those participants must know in order to do what they do.

Underlying the current use of ethnography in the study of teaching and learning is the assumption that an analogy exists between the school or classroom and culture. Given the claims of general ethnography, the particular claim of educational ethnography is that it discovers and describes the ways that members of the school community create and share meaning.

Ethnographers are thus aiming to document the operating knowledge that enables educators and students to navigate everyday life in schools. In this light, teachers, who are perhaps the only enduring and native members of the classroom community (Cazden, Note 2), become very important arbiters of the validity of educational ethnography. They are also very special informants whose knowledge, cooperation, and insight are needed to answer adequately the questions, "What's going on here?" and "What does it mean to educators?"

What is an Informant?

The aims of ethnography are different from those of other kinds of research in the behavioral and social sciences. Out of its long history, ethnography brings certain theoretical assumptions about the organization of human life and attendant traditions and methods for studying it. Ethnographers, for example, do not attempt to control or manipulate the multivariate social world in order to study it. Instead, they pay close attention to the particulars of social life unfolding in communities. In their fieldwork, ethnographers hope, in a very disciplined way, to understand how life is lived meaningfully in a community--be it city, neighborhood, school, or classroom. They hope to understand the relationship of that community to other communities and to the larger social units in which that community may be embedded.

In a sense, every human being is engaged in ethnographic research every day. As people traverse social and physical space, they attempt to reconcile their own interpretations of "what is going on here" with those of their neighbors. They are all trying to negotiate meaning in the social world around them. In that sense all people are fieldworkers.

In research, however, this sense-making enterprise is undertaken self-consciously and rigorously. Care is taken to base inferences about the meaning of what is observed on supporting evidence reflective of the points of view of participants. In short, in describing a community, ethnographers report not their own impressions, but their best accounting of the perspectives of their informants. When the community of interest is a school or classroom, teachers are generally invited to participate as those informants. As community members, their help is enlisted in accurately interpreting what Hymes calls the community's "local meanings" made manifest in talk, movement, and use of space (Hall, 1966; Hymes, Note 3).

Being an informant in an ethnographic study is therefore a very different order of research participation than serving as the naive subject of an experiment, filling out a questionnaire, or letting someone watch and take notes while you teach. If ethnography is a disciplined form of the sense-making that we all do everyday, and if the fieldworker's task is to discover how participants make sense of everyday life in school, then teacher informants potentially have considerable influence on the course and substance of ethnographic inquiry. In this light, according to Hymes (Note 3),

a member of a given community, then, need not be merely a source of data, an object at the other end of a scientific instrument. He or she already possesses some of the local knowledge and access to knowledge that is essential to ethnography, and may have a talent for sifting and synthesizing it, special insight into some part of it.

(p. 4)

In light of the analogy between school and culture and of the recognition that local meanings differ from place to place, the sensitive researcher will find that s/he has a lot to learn from the members of even the most apparently typical American school or classroom.

Modern researchers who use ethnographic techniques to learn about education may have redefined the boundaries of their inquiry, but they are still working in the tradition of their historical counterparts in anthropology.

From careful documentation of individual school communities, researchers gain two kinds of knowledge. First, they discover the local norms--what it is about this school or this classroom that makes it unique and confers its distinctive flavor. Second, by collecting, comparing, and contrasting descriptions of different educational communities, the researcher is able to make what David Hamilton (Note 4) calls "concrete generalizations." The knowledge and insight of native members of the educational community is essential to the completion of both of these tasks. It is not that researchers cannot look and listen for themselves or record and think about their observations. But observation and reliable recording of behavior are insufficient to understand which of the different sights and sounds recorded make a difference to the people in the scene (Hymes, 1977).

To make sense of their observations and to check the validity of their inferences about meaning, researchers rely on a variety of forms of participants' knowledge and help. Sometimes help is in the

form of an answer to a direct question about the meaning of some particular act. An example of this would be the fieldworker asking the teacher why s/he may have moved a student from one reading group to another.

Sometimes help is offered spontaneously, as participants offer commentary on their behavior that may inform one another and, inadvertently, the researcher. An example of this might be the teacher saying to an errant student, "During quiet free time you can choose what you want to do, Jimmy. But you must do it quietly and at a table." Suddenly some of the meaning of and rules for "quiet free time" are exposed.

On other occasions the help is less explicit. Participants do not always talk about their operating knowledge, but their willingness to let someone "hang around" endlessly watching and listening may lead the researcher from surface description of behavior to an insight about its meaning that can be tested against subsequent behavior (McDermott, Gospodinoff, & Aron, Note 5).

In linguistics, the level of description at which the researcher records surface behavior (in this case the sounds of a language) is called the phonetic level. Any trained observer can use the conventional phonetic notation system to record the sounds that speakers make. We could expect a high degree of consensus among experienced transcribers using this system even if they were not personally knowledgeable about the language being recorded. The phonetic level of working is important because it enables recording of behavior in a form that can be used later for in-depth as well as comparative analysis.

However, simply recording faithfully what is heard is insufficient to understand how the different sounds are used meaningfully by the native speaker. In order to decide which differences have meaning and which do not, the researcher must consider not only patterns of sound, but patterns of use as well. In linguistics, this level of analysis is called the phonemic, and it is here that native speakers can be most helpful to the researcher by explaining, describing, evaluating, and displaying patterns in the use of speech.

One linguist, Kenneth Pike (1967), extended the phonetic/phonemic distinction to accommodate not only language, but other aspects of cultural transaction as well. He made a useful distinction between "etic" (from phonetic), or what is externally apparent and measureable about a culture, and "emic" (from phonemic), or the behaviors considered in terms of their meaning to participants. Thus, in linguistics, one notes by means of the phonetic alphabet an externally measurable difference in the pronunciation identified in any language. In some languages, the difference in voicedness when pronouncing /p/ and /b/, though present, does not carry meaning. But in English, this voicedness is a distinctive feature, as in *pig* and *big*. Its presence makes all the difference. Hearing the sounds is therefore necessary but not sufficient to understanding how they work phonemically.

Similarly, in many American school buildings, the schedule card given to visitors indicates that school day starts each morning at an appointed hour and upon the ringing of a bell. This official

information, while reliable, is much like the phonetic transcription.

Emically, in one American classroom, the alert visitor who returns often enough may discover that the school day starts not when the bell rings or the hands of the clock are in a particular position, but when the teacher moves to a carpeted area in the room and calls, "Zenle, peenie, minie, moe, let's go!" Upon inquiring, the observer may further learn that the timing of the teacher's opening move may depend, at least in part, on her reading of student talk and movement--emic indices of their readiness to start the day.

If such meaningful communicative behaviors can be identified for the simple activity of starting the school day, it is worth considering how meaning is communicated and shared by participants for more complex school activities like test administration, social studies discussion, or writing instruction. Furthermore, having recognized the unique and complex ways in which one class starts its day, the observer is likely to wonder about the range of variation extant in daily life in the dozen other classrooms in the building.

Thus ethnographers need informants to help them as they work back and forth between the etic level of behavioral description and an understanding of the emically meaningful nature of the behaviors described. They need this help if they are ultimately to render a description of the community of interest that is both valid and in a form that can be compared and contrasted with other accounts of other communities.

Returning to the example of linguistics, it has been further argued that native informants have functioned as far more than helpers in inquiry

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as anthropologists have undertaken to describe their languages.

Kenneth Hale (1974) asserts; for example, that

many important aspects of the structure of a given language are essentially beyond the reach of the scholar who is not a native speaker of it.
(p. 385)

As a result, Hale contends, "even where we have a clear-cut problem to investigate, the more remote this is from superficial aspects of linguistic structure, the more crucial the native speaker's intuitions become" (p. 387). Therefore, the native speaker's insights and intuitions about the rules governing her/his linguistic behavior function not only to provide answers to linguists' questions or to validate their hypotheses, but profoundly to structure and direct studies of language that may have been initiated by the linguist. For some important research problems, particularly those involving the study of language in use, Hale (1974) maintains that there is doubt

whether the traditional arrangement, in which the linguistic problem is formulated in one mind and the crucial linguistic intuitions reside in another, can work at all--or, where it appears to work, whether it can be said that the native speaker is not, in fact, functioning as a linguist. (p. 387)

Given that the aim of educational ethnography is similarly to penetrate the surface of school and classroom life to document meaningful teaching and learning behaviors, one wonders whether Hale's points are not equally true for the contributions of teachers and other educators who have served as native informants on their practice and their communities.

Applied Ethnography in Education--What's in It for the Informant?

If the role of teacher-informant is unique to research in educational ethnography, it is also potentially more demanding, risky, and rewarding than other kinds of research participation available to teachers. Participation in ethnographic research in one's school or classroom is demanding because informants are usually asked to engage in long-term associations with a curious newcomer. Teachers may be "shadowed" as they go about their busy days. They may be asked at some inconvenience to include the researcher in already well-organized activities. And, through it all, they may be asked many questions that seem trivial or mundane.

Simultaneously, participation in ethnographic research may be risky for members of the school community. While competent researchers carefully negotiate entry into the community, informants must risk trusting them. Typically, an ethnography is a study of one community and is undertaken with the assistance of a few key informants. Participants in such a study cannot get lost in a "large n." There is no randomization of selection, and the preservation of one's anonymity may not really insure privacy--at least not when the findings are shared locally (Colvard, 1967). To make matters worse, the nature of discovery-oriented research is such that few topics are ruled out of an investigation a priori. As a result, ethnographers cannot assure informants in advance precisely what will or will not be asked, what may or may not be discovered. Skeletons in the closet--or just bad days--may well be noted along the way.

Given all of this inconvenience and risk, it is reasonable for teachers to wonder about the third feature of participation in the informant role: a potentially more rewarding experience than would be possible in other kinds of research in which teachers might be more anonymous and less directly involved. To understand the potential benefits of participation as an informant in research, it is useful to consider some of the changes that have been taking place in ethnography as it has been applied to the study of education.

Changes in Ethnography for Education

Researchers such as Rist (1980) have written about the transformation of ethnography applied to the study of education in terms of the confusion that surrounds method, the lack of quality control among studies claiming to be ethnographic, and the inadequate preparation of some researchers presently claiming to do field work. All of this is true--as it might be for any mode of inquiry picked up somewhat

haphazardly by a heterogeneous collection of scholars trying to answer thorny questions about schooling and society. But Rist also makes the important observation that, despite the confusion surrounding ethnography, there are "new and exciting ways in which the method can be applied to some of the most pressing problems in education." (Rist, 1980, p. 10) It is to these new and exciting developments and the teacher's role within them that this account is addressed.

Educational ethnography has been looked to both by researchers in other traditions and by practitioners, in Erickson's (1979) words, to

provide and interpret a more or less broadly synoptic view of the everyday aspects of school teachers', students', and administrators' working in and through the particular social ecology of the moment--in a given classroom, within a given school and community, within a given society. (p. 185)

The application of ethnography to the study of teaching and learning in their social context rests at least in part on the assumption that an analogy exists between the classroom and other social groups or communities.

However, what ethnographers have been learning from and with teachers in the ethnographic study of teaching and classroom life suggests that this analogy is at best a partial one. The classroom does have some of the trappings of community. It is a human collective existing in and through time. The members of a class come, in the course of a school year, to know and act upon the rights and obligation of membership. They participate in meaningful rituals, acquire a shared history, and employ particular communicative codes (Cazden, John, & Hymes, 1972; Shultz & Florio, 1979).

But the classroom is different from most other communities in important ways that have bearing on how it can be studied. It has been suggested, for example, that the classroom community has only one native member--the teacher. This native occupies the classroom year after year, while other participants come and go. The teacher is empowered and responsible to structure most of the important social events taking place within the classroom during the class tenure together. In fact, it might be argued that the teacher makes explicit in the planning of lessons, many aspects of social life that would never be made so explicit by participants in another cultural setting (Mehan & Wood, 1975; Clark & Yinger, Note 6).

One reason why teachers engage in the careful structuring of everyday life in classrooms is that schooling in American culture is thought

to exist for the purpose of growth and beneficial change among the children in the teacher's charge. Classroom interaction research indicates that there is an important relation between the organization of classroom social events and the intellectual skills acquired within them (Gearhart & Newman, Note 7). To document classroom life with any measure of completeness or validity, the ethnographer must consider both the social life of classrooms and the mental activities occasioned by social interaction. Teachers as the chief planners and purveyors of important occasions for learning in the classroom are in a unique position to observe, monitor, and reflect upon both social and intellectual change in the classroom.

What ethnographers have been learning about teaching as skilled performance and about classrooms as environments for learning inclines many of them to think in new ways about the role of teachers as informants on life in the classroom. Some of their new ways of thinking arise from insights about the special knowledge teachers have to share with ethnographers. In other ways ethnographers are concerned that they will have something of value to share with the teachers who have engaged in research with them.

Anyone familiar with the history of ethnography as a mode of inquiry will note that a concern for the utility of findings to the informants is relatively recent (Erickson, 1979; Hymes, 1974). While the literature is replete with accounts of the trust, intimacy, and insights developed out of the relationship between traditional ethnographers and their informants (e.g., Smith-Bowen, 1964; Wagley, 1977; Whyte, 1955) it was typical for the ethnographers to set sail for

home before writing up the report of what s/he had learned in the field (Mead, 1977). Rarely were reports shared with or deemed relevant to the people studied.

As ethnography is increasingly applied to do more than "merely describe" life in social settings, adjustments in the nature of the inquiry process occur. These adjustments concern various aspects of the process including the aims of fieldwork research, the role of the researcher, the kinds of questions addressed and the data collected to answer them, and the sharing and use of findings. These changes in the nature of fieldwork research also have implications for the teachers who participate as informants on the processes of teaching and learning.

Applied ethnographic research in American classrooms is different in some important ways from traditional general ethnography in alien cultures. Given the imprecision of the metaphor between the classroom and culture, the particularly applied nature of classroom ethnography, and the special importance of teachers in structuring the classroom environment, it is not surprising to discover that the information that teachers share with researchers, often takes on a special significance and weight when compared with other kinds of data that one collects in the classroom. Often teacher insights and questions help fundamentally to shape or re-direct the course of research within an inquiry process that is highly inductive and iterative by its very nature (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). Many ethnographers have not only acknowledged but have actually lauded the roles played by teachers in fieldwork. Teachers have not only provided good information about educational

about educational practice; but, to the extent that such information is pertinent and useful to teachers, practice itself has been improved (Hymes in Cazden, John, & Hymes, 1972; Steinberg & Cazden, 1979; Hymes, Note 3; Carrasco, Note 8).

One important assumption both underlying and motivating field-work research in classrooms is that the work is being undertaken with some application in mind, that what is learned can be applied at least in the classroom studied to enhance the processes of teaching and learning (Erickson, 1979). Contemporary ethnographic studies of education are not written and reported thousands of miles from the community studied or in a form inaccessible to the informants. Indeed, the researcher is rare who can even finish data analysis before being petitioned to share the educational implications of the research with teachers, administrators, policy makers, and funding agencies (Scribner, Note 9).

As a result, the boundaries between who studies and who is studied, between who teaches and who is taught have become quite blurred of late in educational ethnography. Open discussion of research and its implications, indeed, the negotiation of findings to diverse audiences rather than the dispassionate dissemination of them or withdrawal from the culture of interest in order to describe it, provides a possibility that researchers and informants will learn together and to mutually beneficial ends (Florio & Walsh, in press; Wanous & Florio, Note 10).

These changes in boundaries have implications for the social identities of both researchers and teachers. When people study a community by attempting to live within it, they begin to share with its members, to need them as well as to know them in significant ways. When a further condition is added, that what people learn will be shared with those who have helped them learn it, teachers become vulnerable. Ethnographers and their work are held accountable by the natives they have come to know. By asking new sorts of questions intended both to elucidate and to enhance the lives of teacher-informants, ethnographers and the quality of their work are changed. Erickson (1979) observes in this regard that

the ethnography of Malinowski and most other classic ethnography . . . does not address such questions as "How can we make this canoe better?" Thus classic ethnographers have been unable to learn what can only be learned when one gets involved in the action, and picks up one's own end of the log. (p. 186)

Similarly, when teachers participate in research as informants, they are given the opportunity to reflect on what they know and do in new ways. Often they are rewarded for such reflection--with time to think, with money for their expert help, and with a sympathetic ear. It is difficult to return to the classroom routine unchanged by such an experience.

Teacher participation in fieldwork research that takes the form not only of answering researchers' questions but of sharing the activities of question framing, data gathering, and drawing and testing inferences can yield multiple professional benefits. By means of their participation, teachers not only stand a chance of enhancing the quality of theory about

their practice, but they develop inquiry skills and experience that may stand them in good stead as they approach daily problems within that practice.

Examination of school practice by practitioners themselves was adopted as an aspect of ethnographic research at first as a way to improve description. Serendipitously, some educational ethnographers sensed something that had been reported by traditional ethnographers about their roles as curious outsiders stimulating something inside of their informants (Mead, 1977). As they "played back" images for teachers, gave them time, reward, and encouragement for reviewing those images, ethnographers began to observe that they were not the only ones gaining powerful insights into the practice of teaching.

By engaging in dialogue with trusted ethnographers, teacher-informants can come to understand their own teaching in new, richer ways. In many cases the kinds of understandings of classroom life described in fieldwork are precisely those that teacher educators hope to formulate and share with their students and that teachers use, often tacitly, to guide their planning and instruction.

Adding the rigor and self-consciousness that epitomize ethnography to the process of understanding everyday school life requires a considerable amount of time and reflection on the part of the educational ethnographer. Time is taken after fieldwork each day to write up the day's notes, carefully thinking through what was seen, heard, and done. Interpretations are drawn tentatively and tested in subsequent field observations. The process is not a hasty one. This reflective attitude contrasts sharply with the press of time and task that weighs

heavily on classroom teachers. Practitioners are generally not afforded the luxury of time to reflect on student performances they have just seen or heard. Nor are they able to take stock of the part they may have played in those performances. Practice in fieldwork skills and reflection on what has been seen and heard can enhance the professional lives of teachers. It is not difficult to imagine how confident use of the research skills of questioning, observation, and inference can enhance a teacher's ability to assess student needs, to interpret the behavior of students from diverse backgrounds in fair and meaningful ways, and to take more accurate stock of the classroom community that s/he is engaged in creating every day with her/his students.

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