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ABSTRACT

Ethnography is increasingly appealing to those who want to study their own literate society and their own discourse communities. As sensitivity to the role of context in the social construction of knowledge increases, ethnography is viewed as a particularly relevant approach for research in schools and classrooms. The participant observer, who is both a member of the group and, simultaneously, its researcher, is considered the most important instrument in ethnography. The ethnographer's integrity is the most important researcher trait. As an insider, the teacher/ethnographer sees, hears, and learns more about the community than an outsider would. But, ironically, being an insider may impose constraints on the ethnographer that jeopardize the integrity of the final document. There is no room to equivocate. In order for the teacher/ethnographer to stay in control of the final written product, it may not always be wise to remain at the school. Staying on may present a difficult choice: to face unpleasant repercussions from alienated colleagues and administrators or to write a document that falls short of presenting an honest portrait made up of the study's findings. (RAE)

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# The Participant Observer as Insider: Researching Your Own Classroom

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Traditionally, ethnography has been carried out in far off lands, among illiterate or semi-literate people who speak "exotic" languages: Mead's Samoa, Malinowski's New Guinea, Geertz' Bali. Even within our own culture, ethnographic research has often taken place among dialect-speaking subcultures: Liebow's inner city and Whyte's, street corner society. But ethnography increasingly appeals to those of us who want to study our own literate society, our own discourse communities.

The ethnographer, according to Clifford Geertz, "'inscribes' social discourse; he writes it down" (1973, p. 19). Ethnography is "thick description" (1973 , p. 10). An anthropological interpretation constructs "a reading of what happens" (1973, p. 18), by "moving from local truths to general visions" (1973, p. 21). Ethnographers, in other words, attempt to peer beneath the surface of individual behavior within a group to discover what is going on. As sensitivity to the role of context in the social

construction of knowledge increases, ethnography, is viewed as a particularly relevant approach for research in schools and classrooms.

While much has been written in general about teacher research (Berthoff, 1981; Goswammi, 1984; Myers 1985), less has been written about teachers as ethnographers. Yet, for teachers who have been initiated into its methods, ethnography appears to be a viable research approach and a particularly relevant tool for writing teachers (Herrmann, 1987). As a teacher/researcher, I have carried out ethnographic research in a high school computers and writing class (1985) and in a university graduate course (1988). My talk today centers on the advantages and disadvantages of doing ethnography when the teacher, an insider, investigates her own, literate classroom.

## Participant Observation

The participant observer, who is both a member of the group and, simultaneously, its researcher, is considered the most important instrument in ethnography. To a large extent, participant observation entails enhancing the normal powers of the teacher. It calls upon the usual teacher-cultivated sensitivies--observing, listening, and questioning. Yet the teacher/researcher role differs from merely teaching in important respects. As a participant observer the teacher also records and describes activities,

using various data-gathering techniques. In a writing classroom, these might include teacher/researcher field notes, student and teacher written journals, audio and video taping, formal and informal interviews, and the collection of relevant artifacts, including the various drafts of students' writing. Data collection is mutifaceted in an effort to capture the diverse perspectives of the participants.

Becoming a participant observer in one's classroom enhances some aspects of teaching, yet makes others more difficult. The teacher/researcher role also differs in many respects from that of an outside researcher.

## Advantages of Being an Insider

### The Researcher

Many advantages in the teacher-as-ethnographer position come from the fact that the teacher is already an insider, an accepted, perhaps highly respected, member of the school community. The teacher/researcher's insider status means she speaks the same insider langauge, understands the local values, and knows the taboos. Her insider knowledge of the formal and informal power structure helps her to get things done. In short, she knows how to operate within the system. Permission to conduct the research, to tape, to interview, and to get access to school records is likely to be

facilitated by her insider status. Of course, from the vantage point of the students and because of her powerful position, the teacher is not a peer of the students and, thus, is also an outsider.

When I carried out my high school study, I had been a teacher in the school for over ten years. Many colleagues were long time friends. In spite of busy teaching schedules, they volunteered their expertise and time to help. The reading teacher assisted me in administering reading tests, the librarian let me use her photocopy key, the media teacher solved video problems and loaned me students, the guidance counselors gave me access to records and support, and teachers listened and shared their insights. Much of the assistance granted to me as an insider, would likely have been denied to me as an outsider. Another advantage is that the teacher/researcher is capable of gathering data not just part of the day, two or three days a week, as an outside researcher might, but everyday, all day long. With continual data gathering opportunities, the likelihood of acquiring a highly detailed, multifaceted and, thus, triangulated portrait of what is going on, increases. In my high school study, I gathered information during class periods, between classes, over lunch in the faculty room, during preparation periods, at faculty meetings, and before and after school.

Ethnography is extremely time intensive, usually requiring an involvement of at least a semester, preferably a year or longer. Therefore, ethnographic research generally presupposes a full-time committment, making it an expensive methodology. However, the teacher/researcher is already a full-time, paid participant at the research site. Since she does not need to take a leave of absence from teaching, ethnography becomes affordable.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the teacher's insider knowledge insures that the research reflects the pragmatic concerns of the practicing teacher, rather than the more esoteric, possibly irrelevant, concerns of an outside researcher.

The Teacher

The teacher who elects to study herself and her students reaps benefits from her role as researcher. She gets an opportunity to step outside and see the school, the class, and even herself, as an outsider might. Classroom research affords the teacher a larger frame of reference for understanding her own teaching and the students learning than normal teaching provides.

The first time I taught writing with computers in a high school class I researched it. The research helped me gain insights, which I might not have had, had I simply been teaching the class. Data gathering techniques helped me

spot the students who were reluctant to ask for assistance or who were overly fearful of using the equipment or trying things out. Group discussions, originially designed to provide me with data for my research, informed my teaching.

The researcher's stance allowed me to modify and, I like to believe, improve my teaching. Research questions, because they are information seeking, are different from teaching questions. Rather than the teachers' all knowing authority, the researcher is eager to learn. The observer's stance of respect mingled with curiousity helped me suppress the teacher's urge to take possession of the students' emerging texts. I discovered that my research gave me an opportunity to listen carefully to what students said. The process of continually forming hypotheses and testing them through observation and analysis helped me to minimize the number of assumptions I made about what was going on.

My classroom-based research has helped me as the teacher understand when I need to slow the pace of activities, inject new ones, change unrealistic expectations, carry out evaluations, and generally modify my teaching to the students' needs. My research has pointed out the value of using peer groups and shown me the negative consequences for students who do not form effective collaborative relationships. It has helped me change from being a teacher who sometimes understood too quickly, into

one who is more willing to wonder, to suspend judgment, and to accept that I don't always understand.

## Disadvantages of Being an Insider

While the teacher/researcher enjoys advantages in her insider role as participant observer, carrying out the dual function of teacher and ethnographer also poses problems.

### The Researcher

The teacher/researcher in public school must confront the paradox that her insider status both facilitates and hinders her position as a researcher. Even after being informed of the nature of the research project, administrators, teachers, and students may perceive of the teacher/researcher simply as a teacher, a view that complicates her job as researcher. When the research is not taken seriously, the researcher's needs, even though critical to the study, may not be met.

In spite of explicit promises made six months prior to my study, the principal of the high school, where I worked and planned to do research, vacilated as the opening of the school year drew near. He did not appear to take my research or his previous promises seriously. He had failed to schedule either the students or the computer lab that I needed. And he appeared unable to provide me with a locked

storage area for my equipment or to provide a student assistant to run the video camera.

The principal's rationale for changing his mind was simple. The lab had to remain available for teachers of math and business. "They have 35 students in a class; you have only 8," he said. "It is 8 against 35." Since he saw me as a teacher, not a researcher, he felt justified in playing this numbers game. Although I had explained ethnographic research to him, stressing its holistic and descriptive nature, I invited him to read my proposal. Perhaps for the first time, he saw me as a researcher. He also understood that his own behavior fell within the domain of the study. The next day his attitude changed from treating me strictly as a teacher, to honoring his committment to me as a researcher. While the principal's reaction provided fascinating data for the study, it nearly brought it to a complete halt.

Just as this administrator, and another, had difficulty understanding my role as researcher, the teachers sometimes had trouble, too. In ethnography data gathering is not restricted to the classroom. Hense, I announced my new status at the first faculty meeting. In particular, I attempted to make sure those I regularly came into contact with understood my participant-observer role. Yet I suspect I continued to be viewed primarily as a fellow teacher. I was constantly privy to a variety of insider remarks that

participants would never make to an outside researcher. While this presented a valuable data, it posed dilemas. Although the school was to remain anonymous, having free access to insider secrets bothered me. I worried about the subtle ways I would betray the community that I lived and worked in, when it came time to write the final document.

Another problem in researching your own class is that students may tend to assume you already know what they know. They often don't think to tell you the obvious; information they readily share with outside observers. Some of my best data on students' reactions to their new writing tools came in response to visitors' curious questions, or in writing intended for an audience outside the class.

The teacher/researcher must deal on a daily basis with the fact that she is not able to devote herself exclusively to the research process. Some of the work can be carried out by others, such as running the video equipment, but taping requires more than technical expertise, it needs the researcher's knowing eye. And, if she is relying on student assistants, the teacher/researcher must deal with the problem of finding and training dependable workers.

And, finally, the teacher/researcher must confront her own blindspots. As an insider her closeness to the situation is capable of creating barriors that hinder her from seeing all dimensions of the bigger picture.

The Teacher

Just as the teacher/researcher cannot devote herself exclusively to the research, she cannot devote herself exclusively to teaching. While teaching and ethnographic research are essentially highly compatible, the research increases demands on the teacher's time. The research sometimes presents the teacher with difficult choices: whether to attend to data gathering or to students' needs. And the dual role represents other problems as well.

The research changes the teacher's traditional relationship with students. The students are no longer simply students. They are now student/researchers. As I suggested earlier, during my high school study, the students' participation in group discussions and their daily journals improved communication for some and made information available to me as the teacher that I might not otherwise have had. Some students enjoyed their new collaborative roles. The probing research efforts appeared to help many students make strides in their meta-cognitive insights into themselves as writers and learners.

Yet the research inadvertently served to impair communication between some of the students and me. Some were reluctant to expose their learning, perhaps for fear of being judged. Some felt overly attended to by the video camera, the student technician, and by me, as I sat beside

them, observing and taking notes. Those with low self-esteem and those who did not feel, for whatever reason, that they "measured up" to the rest of the class, appeared particularly vulnerable. Three students who had a history of school failure became discipline problems. If I had been simply the teacher, I might have been more successful in buffering students' learning problems and in helping them deal with an outside researcher.

Students who become alienated may withhold information. Complex interrelationhips between student and teacher can develop. For example, students may fail to write their journals, throw drafts of papers away, stop paying attention, cut class, and so forth. These behaviors impede the researcher's need for data, but more importantly, they impede the teacher's ability to teach. For some students the teacher must confront the possibility that they would have been better off not being researched.

## Data Analysis and Writing the Final Ethnography

Once the teacher/ethnographer begins to analyze her data and write the final ethnography, several key questions arise: How does the teacher's insider status influence the data analysis and the writing of the final ethnography? Although the research process is collaborative, must the analysis of the data and the writing of the ethnography also be collaborative? Is it possible for the ethnography to be

an honest analysis of the data and a straightforward report of the findings when the participant is an insider? Or will fears of offending and alienating participants be a determining factor in what the ethnographer chooses to see and report?

The inhabitants of a Micronesian island may never comprehend what you are up to. They probably will not read what you have written or challenge your conclusions. Yet the researcher studying literate communities has no such guarantees. On the contrary, it is common practice among ethnographers in literate cultures to share their emerging accounts with participants. This is thought to improve triangulation. Sharing has also come about because of a sense of responsibility to the participants who have given so much of themselves to the research.

However, because of the teacher/researcher's on-going ties and professional standing in the community, sharing may present problems. Participants are liable to disagree with the researcher's interpretation of their realities. The researcher's fears can range from the loss of friends and effective working relationships, to the ultimate sanction, the loss of one's job. Of course, the ethnographer's account is bound to reveal some attractive truths, a portrait of the school and classsroom that the community is happy to present to the world. But it will also reflect

pettinesses and failings, a view the participants are likely to be less willing to admit to.

During the data gathering, the multiple perspectives of the various participants are sought and valued. They are necessary, if the written account is to create a multifaceted description of what went on, rather than portraying one perspective, that of the teacher/researcher. However, no view, no matter how balanced in the eyes of the participant observer, will be the exact view of the individual participants. If the ethnographer has done her job well, the portrait of the group will contain blemishes that leave the participants, including herself, uncomfortable.

If the researcher must share with the participants her emerging portrait, she is likely to tone down perceptions, or worse, eliminate certain perspectives. The teacher/researcher may be unable to resist a strong pull to ignore interpretations that might be offensive to the school community.

The question ethnographers of literate societies, and particularly insiders, must confront is, "Should individual participants, who are not privy to the researcher's more global perspective and who may be more concerned with saving face than with the integrity of the final report, be accorded the power of veto? Personally, I think not.

The researcher's job is to be informed by the entire spectrum of knowledge that has been gained throughout the research process. The final ethnography should represent the researcher's unified interpretation of the participants' patterns of behavior according to some cohesive framework. And, I would argue, the cohesive framework within the final piece of writing risks breaking down, if the participants' objections must be heeded. The ethnography is successful, not if every participant agrees with everything said within it, but if the data has been exhaustively gathered from multiple perspectives, carefully analyzed to include the participants' diverse points of view, and scrupulously honest in reflecting the participant observer's understanding, gained throughout the extensive research process. I like what Geertz says about the matter: "What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to" (1973, p. 9).

In the case of my high school ethnography, I knew there was a strong likelihood that I would not be returning to teach in the school. That, and the fact that the school and community remained anonymous in the final document, gave me a freedom that many teacher/researchers do not have. This freedom did not prevent my worry, as an insider, over imagined reactions of friends and colleagues, but my worries did not inhibit my writing. Had I planned to continue

teaching in the school, however, there was much that I would have portrayed differently. I probably would have eliminated the unflattering picture of the principal and vice-principal. I might have toned down the data suggesting the school's pride bordered on arrogant complacency and I might have modified the evidence suggesting the school's unwillingness to meet the needs of their minority population. But this safer, less painful interpretation, would have been a distortion of my original findings.

## Conclusion

If the participant observer is the most important research instrument, the ethnographer's integrety is the most important researcher trait. As an insider, the teacher/ethnographer sees, hears, and learns more about the community than an outsider would. But, ironically, being an insider may impose constraints on the ethnographer that jeopardize the integrety of the final document. There is no room to equivocate. In order for the teacher/ethnographer to stay in control of the final written product, it may not always be wise to remain at the school. Staying on may present a difficult choice: to face unpleasant repercussions from alienated colleagues and administrators or to write a document that falls short of presenting an honest portrait made up of the study's findings.

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