DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 384 903 CS 214 969

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TITLE Classroom Research in Graduate Methods Courses.
PUB DATE 24 Mar 95
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (46th, Washington, DC, March 23-25, 1995).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Research; *Classroom Techniques; *Ethnography; *Graduate Students; Higher Education; Learning Processes; Methods Courses; *Teaching Assistants; Undergraduate Students; Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS Composition Theory

ABSTRACT

Instructors in general, but particularly first-year graduate teaching assistants tend to lump their undergraduate students into groups and give them various attributes. However appeasing such generalizations are at the moment, they are dangerous both to the teacher and the students. If the instructor thinks his or her students are all honors students, they will perform that way; if he or she believes them to be dumb, they will perform that way too. One exercise in a teaching methods course that helps new teaching assistants to move beyond this tendency requires them to closely examine the learning processes of 2 students in their class, thereby forcing them to see their students as individuals. Any number of examples show the success of this approach. Even if at the time, graduate students complain of the amount of work the research requires and the distraction it seems to cause, the benefits are readily clear. Years later, graduate students themselves comment on the usefulness of a project that works against a debilitating tendency. One difficulty that graduate students have with this project is learning to trust it. Like many in the academy, they are distrustful of narrative or ethnographic research as opposed to empirical research. (TB)

Classroom Research in Graduate Methods Courses

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Presented at Conference on College Composition and Communication Annual Convention
Washington, D.C.
March 24, 1995

"My students hate me," Jill said as she dragged herself into my teaching seminar. I saw her two days later and she was floating several inches off the floor. "I had a great class today. They all talked, they all did the work. They were wonderful!" I rejoiced in her good day and commiserated with her bad day, but I knew that this sort of roller-coaster reaction was probably due to her tendency to see her class as a *class*, not as a collection of individuals, some of whom were prepared, some of whom participated, and some of whom did none of those things on any given day.

Another time, one of our TAs complained that her class refused to read the assignments or even to buy the book for the course. A faculty member consoled her, "Well, every quarter someone has the Asshole class, and it looks as if you've got it this time." This faculty member is a sensitive, caring person, and I know he meant well. And his comment about the Asshole Class is only an extension of the way we all talk about our teaching.

We routinely lump students into groups and give that group various

attributes. "First-year students can't grasp this concept," we say as we review textbooks. "Juniors need to be able to do these things before they take senior-level courses," we say as we design curriculums. We shake our heads in graduate committee meetings and say, "Our grad students can't be expected to achieve this." In fact, making generalizations about our students is the only way we can develop curriculums, courses, and assessments.

The dangers of generalizations, though, can be brutalizing to our students. It's become an educational truism that we get what we expect. If we think our students are all Honors students, they'll perform to our expectations, and if we think they're all dumb as a box of rocks, they will be--at least in our class. For new teachers, especially, the tendency to generalize, to label a class as either "good" or "bad," as "smart" or "fun" or "stupid," can be dangerous, to themselves and to their students.

Many new teachers (see--I'm generalizing!) tend to be inflexible and prone to panic, for the simple reason that their lack of experience leaves them with few options, few "tricks in their bag" with which to cope with problematic situations. As teachers, they are often ignorant in the way Frank Smith defines it: "not knowing that you don't know... not knowing that there is a question... blind dependence that someone else will be able to tell you what to do." They want

the syllabus, they want a script to follow.

New TAs often generalize from their previous experience as students--usually atypical students, very unlike the first-year students they encounter in their classrooms. This leads to situations like the one I ran into as a graduate student. A fellow TA came into our office fuming that his students were abysmally stupid; he'd given them a quiz on basic cultural information that anyone should know by the time they hit 18. A couple of us tried taking the quiz; we failed, too. He was confusing what he thought he knew at 18 both with what he probably did know and with what students, most of whom would not be heading for advanced degrees in literary studies, would know.

Also, beginning teachers like Jill tend to see their students as audiences of a sort; they measure their success in teaching by the collective reactions of their students, day by day.

That's why I ask new teaching assistants to conduct classroom research projects. Classroom research projects focusing on one or two students have the effect of encouraging new teachers (and experienced teachers, for that matter) to see the individuals in their classes--to see their students individually, rather than collectively. As Ruth Ray says in *The Practice of Theory*, "teacher-research focuses on particularities and differences in the ways that teaching and learning

transpire"(27). I've found that asking TAs to do that helps to reverse their tendency to generalize from their previous experiences and focus on the actual students they are teaching. By closely examining one or two students in their classrooms, these new teachers can, as Ray notes, "reflect upon that situation and later... generalize and hypothesize about it in regard to other situations" (21).

Caryl Schlemmer, an energetic nurse returning to school in her thirties, found herself confronted with a student she was initially confounded by: "James's hair is short and wiry and sunset orange," she writes. "This week. His doe-eyed, sloe-eyed sylph-like face reveals nothing and shards of refracted fluorescent light splinter from the tiny ring that impales his right nostril.

"'i enjoy good literary art in the form of graffiti,' says James. James does not cotton to the structure of academia. James, in my classroom, fixates like statuary closest to the door (to make a quick getaway?). James folds into a desk and bends his gaze to his college-ruled paper and sometimes I believe he does not breathe for fifty minutes, he holds so still.... James is not going to participate in my class."

Yet, Caryl, discovers, James is a gifted writer. "He shocks me with his insight. He stabs me with unexpected knowledge. His journal entries vibrate

with energy. So what's the problem? Where's the crux? What's the challenge?

"The challenge is this: all the gifts of James's writing, all the shocks and stabs and vibrations are... coded. James gives nothing freely. You have to mine him.... But the academic system--the huge machinery of evaluation--does not, cannot, will not mine the individual." As a result, James had been placed into a developmental writing course, after a school career that included "time in public school, Montessori, home-school, Dayton Christian, home-school again, and Centerville High School." Caryl decides she cannot, will not let James slide, and her study documents her success in bringing James's considerable talents as a writer into flower. She concludes, "He's taught me a lot about listening carefully, about reading non-verbals, about what is and isn't being said. Because James opened his writing to me so beautifully, I will be less reluctant in the future to go with my gut instinct on a student, to hand over the reins, to relinquish some control."

Like many narratives of classroom research, Caryl's tells a success story. However, Tom Newkirk rightly suggests that we should be suspicious of these stories, because they only tell part of the story of teaching; and to hide our failures can lead teachers to feel like failures because their teaching doesn't match the glowing reports of others (Newkirk 24). All too often, the TAs'

reports outline the collapse of their studies, as does Rich Bailey's study of two students in his ESL class this past quarter.

Rich writes in his introduction, "It is almost amusing to look back at my hypothesis [to see if there is a difference in the improvement of a student who has had one quarter's experience in ESL and a student with no American ESL experience] to see what I had initially planned. The idea of finding a provable improvement, let alone being able to compare two students' improvement, seems ludicrous now." Rick examined several writing samples of two students, doing careful error analyses. One, from Cambodia, had spent several years in the US; the other, from Sri Lanka, had only been in the states for a few months. His guess was that being immersed in American language and culture would give the Cambodian student a decisive edge. What he found was the opposite: the Sri Lankan student could write far better. To further investigate, he interviewed both students. Here he found the source of his mistake: the Sri Lankan had had several years of instruction in English in Sri Lanka, including intensive private tutoring; the Cambodian, on the other hand, had come directly from a childhood in a refugee camp to an American high school, where his ESL training consisted of one session each week for one year.

From Rich's point of view, the study was a failure, but for me it was a

ringing success. Rich had learned a research method and its limitations. He had closely examined two of his students and found them to be even more singular than his special classroom situation suggests (a class that may consist of 10 students from 4 continents and 10 countries with 10 different languages). He concludes, "I now realize that students' writing is more than a separate number of errors and a separate number of statistics. All of these factors influence each other to form the whole of a student's writing. Yet the most important thing I have learned is that each student is very different and must be studied as a separate individual; the differences that exist in students and their lives make any attempt at comparison a fruitless effort." Bingo.

So, how is classroom research integrated into the preparation of TAs to teach? At Wright State, we've developed a fairly involved TA preparation program that begins ten days to two weeks before the fall quarter begins. New TAs spend 3 days to a week, depending on the fall calendar, in an all-day workshop. In the workshop, they do a complete assignment sequence based on the ENG 101 text they'll be using, and we discuss how that sequence might be taught. They complete an essay during this time that they can then use as a model in their own classes.

The next week they are paired with an experienced ENG 101 instructor

and given a "practice run." During summer orientation we invite students to come to campus a week early to get a jumpstart on college and their first-year writing course. We divide them into groups of 6 to 8 which meet each morning. The new TAs, with their partners as backups, lead these small groups through the assignment sequence they wrote the previous week, gaining experience in dealing with a class in a safe, controlled situation. In the afternoons, we all meet to discuss the morning and plan both the next day and develop their own course syllabuses. So they walk into their own classrooms the following week with about 15 hours of teaching experience under their belts.

During the fall quarter, TAs teach 101 and take a 2-quarter-hour (that's half-strength for our program) graduate seminar in teaching college composition. They do reading, keep a teaching journal, and compile a teaching portfolio that the past couple of years has included a videotape. In the winter, they teach 101 again and take the continuation of the teaching seminar. During this quarter, when they've already experienced teaching 101 once and are into their second quarter of teaching, they do the classroom research project.

Because we only have 10 weeks, and during those ten weeks we also have to troubleshoot their current teaching and prepare to teach the second course in our first-year sequence, and because the TAs are taking two four-hour courses in

addition to the seminar, I keep the requirements for the study fairly loose. Students read several samples of their predecessors' projects, which are kept in binders in the University Writing Center; they read a couple of essays, like Nancie Atwell's "The Thoughtful Practitioner" (Atwell 3-16), that give a rationale for classroom research; and they read, and we discuss, an overview of classroom research techniques from Ruth Hubbard and Brenda Power's excellent handbook for teacher researchers, *The Art of Classroom Inquiry*. And then they're off: with 10 weeks total time, they typically spend 6 or 7 working on their projects, which culminate in brief oral presentations to the class and written reports.

Like Ruth Ray's graduate students conducting teacher-research, my students have the same questions: "How do I decide on a research focus? What if I change my mind at midterm and want to focus on something else? What if the students in my study drop the course or tutoring session and leave me with nothing to research? What should I do when students skip class for weeks at a time or when the people I want to interview decline or don't show up? What if, after all this work, I don't find anything significant? What if I find out at the end of the term that I haven't collected enough data or that I've collected the 'wrong' kind? How do I make sense of all the data I *have* collected?" (107)

And, while I sympathize with Ray's concern that these questions reflect too much a concern for product over process, the result of learning rather than ongoing questioning and engagement, my own primary goal in assigning this is first and foremost to improve their abilities as *teachers*; and, given the anxiety TAs face in the classrooms they sit in and the classrooms they stand in, I want to help them as much as I can. Glenda Bissex says that our methods should "allow us to use our empathy and intuition while giving us the distance to look critically. (Bissex and Bullock 13). Whether answers like,"Be patient" and "Don't worry" and "You'll come up with something, trust me" really help them trust their empathy and intuition, I don't know, but in 6 years of asking for this assignment, no one yet has failed to turn something in.

If there is a constant area of difficulty, it's in getting these students to trust that what they're doing is legitimate. Ray explores Jerome Bruner's contention that humans function cognitively in two ways: through a "paradigmatic" mode that emphasizes argument, proof, and empiricism; and a"narrative" mode that focuses on storytelling (54). Although most of our graduate students have entered English studies through a love of literature, they, like most everyone else, discount the knowledge gained through stories in favor of empirically-based knowledge. For them, if it's to be called "research," it must be empirical. So

one hurdle I face is convincing them that they stand to learn, and others stand to learn, from the story their research tells--that they needn't have control and treatment groups, carefully-defined variables, and the other necessary ingredients of "research." For most, I think, recognition of the value of their looking and notetaking and textual examination and interviewing comes as they immerse themselves in it. The rest at least humor me.

How, then, do the TAs who do this research feel about it? During the course itself, they are anxious, frustrated, and exhausted by it, by and large. By the end, many see value in having done it, but at this point the research project is still a graduate school exercise, something to be done to fulfill a requirement. Sometime during the second year, though, something seems to happen. Again and again, a second-year TA will stop by my office to say, "You know, I really hated doing that classroom research project. But now I'm really glad I did it. I learned so much." So, while I try to figure out how to delay handing out student evaluation forms for a year, I take those unsolicited endorsements as encouragement to continue to ask for classroom research by new TAs.

At the same time, I hope that the teachers we're preparing through classroom research become the sort of teachers that Glenda Bissex hopes they will: "They see things differently. Problems in their classrooms become areas

for investigation, for learning, and not just situations to avoid or bemoan." And they change their relationship to their students: as Glenda notes, "The first [essential of teacher research] is *respect*--respect for the persons that one is observing, which means that the researcher is in a position of a learner. The question is, 'What can I learn from this other person?'"(Gillespie 81, 73).