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ABSTRACT

The relationship between research and autobiography is explored. The planned study was a qualitative study of literacy methods instruction at the college level, a case study of one class of students and their professor. The study was based on the premise that preservice teachers need experience-based learning opportunities in the classroom in order to acquire a practical teaching pedagogy and knowledge base. As the study progressed, it became not just an observer's account of another teacher, but a self-reflective and open-ended research narrative. The issue of the researcher's subjectivity became an important dimension of the work. Unless the researcher understood herself in relation to the study, there was no basis for judging alternatives, initiating change, and responding to students' needs in the learning process. Autobiography became a link between theory and practice in the dual roles of teacher and researcher. It played a role by allowing the researcher to make sense of experience after the fact. (Contains three handout pages and nine references.) (SLD)

Exploring Where the "Self" and "Study" Intersect: Autobiographical Inquiry as a Framework for Qualitative Research

by

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Originally I intended to describe how autobiographical inquiry was an important qualitative research tool, how self-study was a stepping stone toward arriving at a better understanding of my research study, *Building A House That Remembers Its Forest: Research and the Construction of a Personal Pedagogy For Literacy Teacher Education*. But I have discovered that it is the other way around--that the tools of qualitative research have helped me construct a better, more useful autobiography. Today I want to outline the relationship of autobiography to my research process. But first I'd like to share a quote by Tess Gallagher that captures the spirit of my study and helped me find a title...

> . . . My brothers and I are again the woodcutter's children. We play under the trees, but even our play is a likeness to work. We construct shelters of rotten logs, thatch them with fireweed, and then invite our parents into the shelters to eat their lunches. . .
>
> When I think of it now, it is not far from the building of those makeshift shelters to the making of poems. You take what you find, what comes naturally to the hand and mind. There was the sense with these shelters that they wouldn't last, but that they were exactly what could be done at the time. There were great gaps between the logs because we couldn't notch them into each other, but this allowed us to see the greater forest between them. It was a house that remembered its forest. And for me, the best poems, no matter how much order they make, have an undercurrent of forest, of the larger unknown.
>
> To spend one's earliest days in a forest with a minimum of supervision gave a lot of time for exploring. I also had some practice in being lost. Both exploring and being lost are, it seems now, the best kind of training for a poet. Tess Gallagher (1983, p.121-122)

The experiences of exploring and being lost are the best kind of training for teachers and researchers as well as poets. Journeying through the unfamiliar woods of new theory and practice, exploring the larger unknown forest of experience, feeling completely lost before finding the way home again, these are the elements of a learning odyssey that render the once-familiar home a completely different place. New understandings develop through inquiry and stem from interludes with the larger

unknown. In simile, the forest is my professional life as both an elementary and college-level teacher. I have constructed houses, various versions of curriculum, in the manner of styles I admire. But the strength of those structures depends on the degree to which I understand the forest of my life and experience. The structure is stronger and more meaningful when it is a house that remembers its forest.

My research story has its beginnings in my early professional experiences when I struggled through new challenges and tried to find my way. As a graduate student I spent long hours planning my first courses. I combed through texts, re-familiarized myself with important theories, and prepared mounds of materials. Each time I put together a curriculum that I thought covered all the theories and practices that were essential for my students to know and understand. My original notions of good teaching meant efficiently and masterfully covering content as the basis of educating students. With a perspective like that it didn't take me long to earn some pretty lukewarm teaching evaluations. I suppose getting those evaluations marked the point at which my dissertation topic began to emerge. *To improve my teaching*--this became the primary goal of my doctoral experience.

In order to pull myself from my teaching slump, I sought advice from Brenda Power, who was my doctoral advisor. I incorporated many of her teaching practices. At first I took a leap of faith, using the structures she recommended which centered on writing and reading workshop; this approach put the experience before theory. At that time the whole idea of learning theory through activity and the practices of engaging in workshop as a means to do so at the college level was new to me. Upon trying her suggestions in class I got a positive response from the students, and that was a welcome relief. The experience of learning itself had become memorable for them and content could be put into a context that had immediate relevance. The semester ended on a positive note. The teaching evaluations showed that it was a good semester for my students and, as a result, for me too. This experience caused me to want to know

more...now I wanted to see how an experienced professor conducted the practices that had been so successful for me as a novice college teacher. I wanted an opportunity to look closely at the instructional practices that had influenced my own teaching. So, as questions emerged in my own learning and teaching agenda, I began to conceive of a dissertation topic that would allow me to study Brenda's approaches to literacy methods instruction. Over time these questions changed and developed into what would become the basis of my dissertation research:

Research Questions

1) What principles of teaching and learning are at work in Brenda's methods classroom?

2) What course structures provide the framework for learning?

3) How are curriculum and content addressed in the methods course?

4) What instructional strategies are in place that promote the development of the classroom community?

I designed a qualitative study of literacy methods instruction at the college level--a case study of one class of students and their professor, Brenda, framed within the larger context of the development of college teachers, myself among them. The study is based on the theoretical premise that in order to help pre-service teachers acquire a practical teaching pedagogy and a foundation of knowledge, they need experience-based learning opportunities within the college classroom.

Now I'll provide an overview of my research process. I was an observer in Brenda's literacy methods course during the fall semester of 1994. The plan for data collection was simple. I would be in the classroom for every session, from the beginning to the end of the semester. While the class was in session I would take notes, collect work samples, and interview the teacher and students. The data I collected included:

•Transcriptions of classroom language including the instructor's presentations and large-group discussions.

•A variety of notes including: Contextual notes, personal notes, theoretical notes, and field notes.

•Copies of students' written assignments including papers, responses to readings, and self-evaluation forms.

•Excerpts of literature read to the class by the instructor.

•Texts written by the instructor, including two published books and one unpublished monograph.

Early in the study I began reading my notes with an eye to linking specific examples in the data to my research questions. Initial categories emerged, developed, and

often merged with others. I considered how categories were linked to the larger issues in my study which were becoming clearer through my autobiographical writing, which I'll explain in a minute. The coding of data helped me identify patterns and themes. This helped me relate what I saw in the data to my research questions, which stemmed from my classroom teaching experiences.

My study progressed and it became not simply an observer's account of another teacher, but a self-reflective and open-ended research narrative. But that was not the genre of research writing I had originally intended. The style of writing and the purpose of the study both evolved throughout the writing process. A month after I had completed data collection, I began writing about some of my findings. I assumed the standpoint of an outsider trying to describe the teachers' role in the classroom. But after several hours of writing I realized I was getting nowhere. I was unable to hit my stride. I decided to back up, out of the data, and begin again by writing about my personal experience as a college teacher and my connection to the study. It was unplanned, stream-of-consciousness writing which allowed me to discover, through the act of writing, more about my purpose. What was written became a way to connect with the subject. I was able to clarify the purpose of my research and focus my data analysis approach.

The issue of subjectivity in relationship to my study is an important dimension of the work. Empirical-analytical research, the dominant mode of inquiry in research on curriculum and teacher education (Schubert, 1989), presents the views of others and then explains how they all have limitations, and that their shortcomings are thus and so, and that the reported findings offer a better version of truth. But in the context of this study, I

examined Brenda's teaching practices not with an eye toward discovering what they failed to accomplish, but with the desire to see one method of teaching more clearly so that I could better understand myself as a teacher. Because of my own position in the study, and my close relationship to the researched, I realized from the outset that subjectivity might be an issue of concern. Critics might ask, "Is this study reliable?" After all, Brenda and I shared a strong rapport before I began my research study, and through the course of my doctoral experience she became my friend, mentor and dissertation advisor.

Confidence, trust, and respect characterized our relationship. But these are the very qualities one hopes to foster in a classroom and in one's teaching. Rather than labeling them as bias I believed it was necessary for these qualities to be cultivated and acknowledged in the research. Because of the subjective nature of my study--the examination of the teaching practices of my mentor under her guidance and direction-- I began to understand how autobiographical inquiry would provide the necessary epistemological foundation for my study. Formalist standards for qualitative research caution against friendships between the researcher and researched because there is a risk of bias (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992).

These cautions seem to apply to a research situation where the "alien" researcher is seeking to know "native" populations and is concerned with results and content rather than methods of learning and the nature of relationships between learner and teacher, which need to be experienced and entered into on a personal level. The "native/alien" relationship didn't apply to my research world. I had already "gone native." For two years I had been an apprentice to the teaching and research perspectives and practices of Brenda

and other faculty members in the College of Education at the University of Maine. In fact, a primary concern driving my interest in the study was to "go native" all the way. I wanted to study the practices of my mentor in order to improve my own practices--a very subjective endeavor, indeed! Surely, I thought, there are research models that won't discredit my study on the grounds of subjectivity. After all, unless I understood myself in relation to the study, I had no basis for judging alternatives, initiating change and responding to students' needs in the learning process.

I found wisdom and relevance in the words of a leader in the teacher research movement, Dixie Goswami. In an interview with Tim Gillespie she discussed questions that teacher researchers ask in order to maintain high standards for their research. These questions appear in Table 2.3 and also in your handout.

Goswami's Standards of Teacher Research

"Is it ethical?" Does inquiry exploit anyone, especially students and parents?
"Does it improve the quality of learning in my classroom?" Does inquiry help establish a rich environment for students and teachers to learn.
"Is it valid?" [or, rephrased] **"Is it meaningful for us?"** Does it make sense to participants?" [To assess validity] "I would ask people who participated in the study if it seems accurate and if it makes sense in light of what they know from experience to be true. Those involved in the study have to find it meaningful and useful.
"Is it replicable?" Is the inquiry systematic and intentional as I described it in my narrative or my report or my journal, so the readers will know what I did, how I did it, and why I did it? It's not going to be replicable in the sense that I've controlled variables and there they are and we can do it exactly the same way next year, but I have a deep obligation to tell you what we did, how we did it, and why, so that we can keep on doing it. That's where I'm going to get my answer to the question whether the case study is replicable.
"Is it generative?" That is, does it generate good questions? We need to ask if our inquiry raises questions from us as teacher researchers and questions for others. If we claim to have the last word. . . forget it! If it generates more questions to keep us excited and happy, if it lets us see how complex teaching and learning are, that's great.

Source: Gillespie, T. (1994) An Interview with Dixie Goswami. Teacher research 1 (2). 97-100.

And last April, at the Annual Meeting of AERA, Yvonna Lincoln proposed a modified set of standards which apply to qualitative research done in the tradition of the new epistemologies such as action research and classroom-based teacher research methodology. For your reference these are also included in the handout.

Emerging Criteria for Qualitative Research

Positionality (*or* standpoint epistemology)--The study must explicate the researcher's grounds and standpoint.
Community--The research takes place and is addressed to a community. Objectivity can deter community, and can be anti-communal. Any form of knowing is relational. The new epistemologies create relational knowing.
Neighborliness--Is a kind of "praxis"-- a practical activity having a theoretical base. "Praxis" is based in critical theory and action research traditions.
Voice--Issues concerning who speaks, how and why, are important to the study. This creates praxis.
Reflexivity--Is a critical subjectivity. Reflexivity is a high consciousness or awareness to understand others in order to move to create personal and social transformation.
Reciprocity--Is the recognition that persons are always in relations. The researcher must understand relations of subjects and include them in research. Trust, respect, and mutuality between researched and researcher are of primary importance.
Sacredness--the researcher must have a deep respect for the researched.
Sharing of the perquisites of privileges--It is the debt we owe to the lives we portray. Questions concerning who owns the lives we use, and the realization that most research is consumed by ourselves are central to the issue of perquisites.
Cautions--Deciding which criteria to use at which stage is something the researcher needs to consider. All criteria are relational. Valid knowledge "is a matter of relationship." Research methods are ethics (dissolution of boundaries between ethics and methods).

Source: Lincoln, Y. S. (1995, April). Emerging Criteria for Qualitative Research. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.
See also: Lincoln, Y. S. (1995) Emerging criteria for qualitative research. Qualitative inquiry. 1. (3).

In his book, To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher (1993), Bill Ayres compares teaching to Stanislavsky's method acting. He writes,

> Any part must be learned anew, day by day, moment by moment, and year by year... Great acting is always in search of better acting, always beginning again... Greatness in teaching, too, requires a serious encounter with autobiography: Who are you? How did you come to take on your views and outlooks? What forces helped to shape you? What was it like for you to be ten? What have you made of yourself? Where are you heading? An encounter with these kinds of questions is critical to outstanding teaching because teachers, whatever else they teach, teach themselves. Of all the knowledge teachers need to draw on, self-knowledge is most important (p.129).

For me, autobiography has been a link between theory and practice in my dual roles as teacher and researcher. The study wouldn't have happened if I hadn't been thinking about the process of becoming a creative educator. While I was describing, interpreting and analyzing data I collected, I was coming to terms with and describing the process of my own development as a teacher. I studied Brenda's teaching so I could find out what's individual to me and where I am situated in the society of teachers.

Autobiography was also an ethical dimension of the study. Last spring, in San Francisco, Barbara Finkelstein said, "We have to care about interpretive meanings associated with fact. Interpretation means to intrude" (April, 1995). When the data have to do with people, the researcher needs to be self reflective in order to explore and explain, in the most honest terms possible, the links that are being made between subject and conclusion. These links shape and determine the research findings. I examined my mentor's self-reflective teaching practices as a self-reflective researcher. Autobiography played a role, not simply by allowing me to recount my experience, but to make sense of it after the fact.

The story I have just told hasn't ended. What I learned from this research--the importance of classroom structures that provide space and time for students and teacher to inquire, explore, and reflect, continue to be a reality of my teaching approach. For me, autobiography is the essence of my understanding of curriculum and teaching. Questions, concerns and interests I have had through my years of teaching determine my present research agenda, which, in turn influences the issues I bring into the classroom. I place a great emphasis on self-awareness in my teaching, and this influences what I do as a teacher. The activities I use and issues I present in the classroom are determined by on on-going assessment of my students. I try to help cultivate in my students an awareness of the importance of autobiography to the act of teaching--I use the structure of writing workshop in which my students write personal narratives of learning experiences that have been memorable to them. These narratives become the curriculum of the course and a vehicle for connecting with the theories and practices we read about. My students conduct case studies on elementary students--they analyze data including notes from observations and interviews. They learn to develop their own awareness of how autobiography plays a role in their lives as teachers and the lives of their students as learners.

Research is like a work of art--a creative and aesthetic construction. At the hands of the creator, it serves as a work for others to admire and appreciate. At that point it becomes something for the reader to take up and introduce to others or to incorporate into their own autobiography. Autobiography plays a central role in the way I approach research and scholarship. I recognize the power of narrative to convey ideas and information and, with awareness and intention, included autobiography as a method of presentation today.

My story of teaching and research is about being lost in the forest and finding my way home. It is also a story about the process of building a "house," a personal pedagogy for literacy methods education, with enough gaps in its structure that force a view of the

"undercurrent of forest" of my life. Trying to explore that forest, the larger unknown worlds of students, content, and teaching, and the ways those worlds meet and interact, is central to the art of teaching. And yet the nature of their union cannot, in isolation, be taught. It must be learned through experience. Once experienced the understanding develops and changes.

I'd like to close with T.S. Eliot's famous poem. He must have been thinking autobiographically when he wrote:

> We shall not cease from exploration,
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.
> T.S. Eliot ("Little Gidding," in Four Quartets, [1941] 1952

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