

# **Introduction to teaching: An ethnographic study**

Hui-Min Chou

Assistant research fellow

Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica

128 Sec. 2, Academia Rd, Nankang, Taipei 115, R.O.C.

mayaw@gate.sinica.edu.tw

## **Abstract**

The overall purpose of this study was to construct a description and interpretation of a teacher educator's teaching practice. The instructor, whom I studied on, taught an undergraduate course, *Introduction to Teaching* (EDCI280). Observation and interview were conducted to generate a description and interpretation of the interaction in the classroom, and to realize the instructor's perception about the teaching. Of special interest in this research was to understand how a teacher preparation course was constructed. Therefore, the data collection would be guided by the research question: How does a teacher educator construct his practice so that the preservice teachers may understand the meaning of teaching?

**Keywords: Teaching, ethnographic study, Teacher education**

## **Introduction**

A teacher preparation program has to incorporate two important components: a theoretical element and a practical element (Barber, 1995; Davies & Ferguson, 1997; Drever & Cope, 1999). The theoretical element refers to the various dimensions of the craft of teaching that allow students to develop the ideas, knowledge, and dispositions that enrich the learning opportunities for all students. According to Goodlad (1994), theory should enable students to achieve five key tasks: (i) challenge personal implicit and explicit beliefs about, for example, how children learn; (ii) demonstrate how things might be otherwise, giving them a sense of alternative possibilities; (iii) promote a grasp of education as distinct from training in order that they can develop a personal philosophy of education; (iv) encourage intellectual curiosity; and (v) stimulate attitudes tolerant of complexity and plurality of viewpoint. However, an introductory course of teaching may not be able to equip students with all these abilities.

Most of us would agree that teaching experience is important. Clifton et al. (1994) even found that students in their study reported that the teaching practice was the only useful component. Students' experiences in their university-based were perceived as irrelevant and negative. Whitaker & Moses (1988), similarly, found that the primary and secondary teachers in the U.S. were not significantly influenced by a knowledge of academic learning theories when asked to name or describe the learning theory that supports their teaching practices in the classroom. This research also intended to explore how the instructor's practice and perception correspond to these findings.

## Theoretical Perspective

Interpretive-ethnographic research, which involves in-depth and intensive observation afford researcher the opportunity to better understand how teacher educator constructs his practice. Schwandt (2000) offers an Interpretivist's perspective: "to understand a particular social action (e.g., friendship, voting, marrying, teaching), the inquirer must grasp the meanings that constitute that action" (p. 191). Therefore, it is essential to require the instructor's motives, beliefs, desires, and thoughts on teaching. The features of an ethnographic research including "the use of participant-observation to study a community for an extended period of time, a holistic approach, the portrayal of the community from the perspective of the participants, a focus on culture, and a focus on context" (Lareau & Shultz, 1996, p. 3).

Teacher preparation courses provide for a firm and demonstrable knowledge and competence in the teacher's area of disciplinary expertise; they also provide the future teacher with demonstrable understanding and competence in the pedagogical and curriculum-related skills of practical teaching. In short, the content and practical knowledge bases of the future teacher were seen to be of central concern (Lovat, 1999).

Lovat (1999) contrasts the terms "training" and "education" in attempting to capture an element of the debate about the essence of the professional program. Typically, the "training" paradigm emphasizes characters like efficiency, competency, prescriptive teaching, practical experience, and, interestingly, high value placed on the school and a low value placed on the higher education (cf. McCulloch & Fidler, 1994). The knowledge the training paradigm emphasizes is practical knowledge. In contrast, the "education" paradigm emphasizes concern for responsive research, complexity of

knowledge, ongoing reflectivity, theory informing practice and high value placed on the role of higher education, which is seen to offer a perspective on learning which is distinctive and, ultimately, necessary to cope with changes in the practice of teaching (cf. Goodlad, 1994; Furlong & Maynard, 1995). The knowledge it strives for is complex, combining content, theoretical and practical knowledge.

Davies and Ferguson (1997) assert that an essential part of teacher competence is the ability to build relationships, between teacher and student, teacher and colleagues, teacher and agencies, and, increasingly, between teacher and parents. There may be a need for future development of teacher education courses to include more emphasis on developing relationships between learners, teachers and parents (Barber, 1995, p. 76).

According to McAllister (1993), if school experience does not facilitate the motivation to think critically about alternative questions beyond those deemed appropriate by any current status quo, then students may unconsciously become teachers who perpetuate the reproduction of cultural capital by maintaining existing social class differentials in educational attainment; pupils who, for example, “fail” to cope with lessons may be deemed “low-ability”--a stigmatisation which impacts on their identity, future aspirations and the value they are likely to attach to the schooling of their own children.

## **Methodology**

**Role of researcher.** I assumed a participant-observer role during the course of the study. Angrosino & de Pérez (2000) indicate that “the observer-as-participant role allow the researcher to interact casually and nondirectively with subjects” (p. 667). In this role, I attempted to understand how the course instructor (pseudonym Larry)

constructed his practice, and how he manages to have his preservice teachers understand the meaning of teaching. My teaching experience assisted me in understanding classroom teaching. I taught for 9 years as an upper elementary teacher in both rural and urban school setting in Taiwan. The elementary students I taught and the undergraduate students I observed in this research study were, however, quite different culturally, socially, and academically. I do not have experience in teaching undergraduate students how to teach. Nor do I have knowledge of adults' learning. But I believe this unfamiliarity helped me not to take the routine of class in U.S. for granted. That is, hopefully, the crucial clues were more likely to be recognized and reported for interpretation.

To better understand the nature of this class, I recognize that a longer-term ethnographic study should be conducted for achieving a complete and actual understanding of the study context. A one-shot observation and interview would not validate the meaning based on this study. Nevertheless, this research served as a useful exploratory study acquainted me with the process of ethnographic research.

**Methods.** The main sources of data of this research were from the observation and interview. Field notes were taken during the class observation. The observations were taken place in the date of Feb. 11<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>, March 4<sup>th</sup>, and April 15<sup>th</sup> respectively. I sat with students during class, writing fieldnotes, without videotaping. During these sessions, I joined the class and group discussions, listened to the students' perception on teaching. My goal of these observations was to understand the interaction of teacher-students and how the instructor processed his teaching in the classroom.

By focusing on the instructor's practice and perception on teaching, I also interviewed the instructor, and transcribed for further analysis. Table 1 contains the semi-structured protocol used in this study.

**TABLE 1**

**Semistructured interview protocol**

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1. You have emphasized the issue of diversity in your teaching; could you tell me more about this? You have mentioned that “simply put diverse students together does not mean it value”, what does that mean?
  2. Do you think you have incorporated a specifically theoretical perspective in your teaching? Do you think it is important for teacher to read research journal?
  3. How do you construct your teaching?
  4. What do you think about the field placement? Do you arrange field placement for your students?
  5. Have these preservice teachers ever encountered some negative experience during the classroom observation? How would you help them deal with this?
  6. How do you determine your success as an instructor of this course? In what circumstance would you consider as a good teaching?
  7. What kinds of questions about teaching brought by students during the class mostly? What questions addressed by them you consider as “good” questions?
  8. Will you encourage them to challenge themselves? How?
  9. If you have chance to arrange the teacher education program what would you do?
  10. Do you have any suggestions on this study?
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**Analysis.** I collected and analyzed the data through the use of the qualitative technique of analytic induction to construct patterns of similarities and differences in the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). I analyzed the interview to provide insight on how the instructor perceived and organized his teaching of EDCI 280, and how his students conceptualize teaching. As I mentioned above, a teacher preparation should combine practical and theoretical components. The field placement represents the practical component in this course. Therefore, I set out to explore the evidence that indicating the instructor’s use of practical element. The course syllabus has detailed the field placement, including the purpose, process, and evaluation. Based on the

description, I framed my interview question by asking the instructor's perception. In reading the transcript of interview, I looked for incidents that confirmed or disconfirmed my initial assertions. I read through the data and the syllabus, pulled out the pieces which related to the field placement. The first and second assertions were pretty much made by this process.

After conducting the first observation, I read through the field note to develop a more broaden perspective of the instructor's teaching. I wrote down the question and things that I was interested in my field note. During the second and third observation, I tried to look at the routine and special activity in the class. The last observation was their assertion day. I wrote down the assertion students made to understand how the students realize the meaning of teaching. I simultaneously developed provisional data categories during the observation. Then I went back to read the interview description. I found much supported data were under the category of *reflective*, which I believed it may contribute to the instructor's practice.

**Limitation.** It would be worthwhile to look also at the way the instructor arranged the field placement for students, and the field experience of these students.

Unfortunately, the instructor did not arrange the placement. He explained:

I don't arrange for the placement. That means I don't choose the mentor teacher. But absolutely it's critical. I think in the class it would be impossible without having field placement component. In fact the whole idea is the combination of in a university base seminar discussion and in the field observation and teaching practice.

Not being able to interview students about their field experiences is also the limitation of this research. Students' perception on the instructor's teaching would generate an important insight. How the students perceive their field experiences? How

do students come to realize the meaning of teaching? These questions could lead to further inquire. Also, my English competence limited the understanding of the instructor's practice, especially in the classroom observation. I might have missed some of the important clues due to my limited English. I might also have misunderstood what the instructor really said to me.

### **Context Overview**

Since I was interested in learning how a class in a teacher preparation program at the University of Maryland was conducted. I looked at the course listing in the department, and decided on a course to study. I decided that I should examine an introductory course. I targeted EDCI 280. Then, I contacted the course instructor, who was teaching the course, to get permission to observe his teaching and to interview him.

The course had three central purposes:

1. To provide opportunities for you to examine and reflect on your conception of teaching and begin to craft a framework for teaching which you will further develop through your experiences in teacher preparation classes, professional meetings, and your experience in real classrooms.
2. To provide an opportunity for you to enhance your understanding of the complexities of students' lives inside and outside of the classroom.
3. To provide opportunities for you to engage in professional conversations with your classmates about problems and dilemmas of practice.

The schedule of this class was Monday from 2:00 through 3:50 at the basement of Benjamin building. There were thirty-one students in this class, and most of them



were female. There was only one male student in this class. This class was predominantly white; there were two African American students, one, the instructor told me, was from Africa. There were one Asian student and two Latin students.

### **Major findings**

To understand how the instructor constructed his practice, it was essential for me to understand the objectives of this course. One of the purposes of this course was to provide opportunities for students to examine and reflect on their conception of teaching, and to understand the complexities of students' lives inside and outside of the classroom (syllabus). For reaching this goal, students were expected to attend and actively participate in the field placement from Feb. 25<sup>th</sup> to May 13<sup>th</sup>, to observe classroom events and interactions.

- **The instructor incorporates a practical component into his practice**

Although I did not go to any classroom where the students were placed, the discussion about their classroom observation revealed that many of them were very involved in the classroom activities. Actually I noticed that the experiences of field placement generated many meaningful conversations in the classroom. The instructor told me "it is impossible without having field placement component". In the interview he said:

The most important thing is that they are studying on a student. I think it is a qualitative work. They are making observation. Also I encourage them, if possible, to collect student's words so they can think about their works. They are to develop assertion, support evidence, and gain some insight from the observation. I think there

are important activity and assignment incorporated in this course.

That would not be possible if they are not placed in a classroom. And the whole idea is having them to watch student very carefully and learn about students. The philosophy is they'll never be able to pay attention to a class without first learning paying attention to one student.

Observation was clearly important to students in defining the standard to aim at. They accepted what they saw as "good practice" and tried to emulate it, even while admitting that it did not always work (Drever & Cope, 1999). During my observation, no teacher was described negatively.

According to Larry's narrative, this assignment "enable(s) them to ask question to collect data in a systematic way to refine their thinking and their judgment and their analytical skills." He wanted them become a "better thinker", and he told me the "student portrait assignment is the best example of what an assignment help them to do that." When I asked him how does he determine his success as an instructor of this course? He told me:

I like to see my student deepen their thinking, and grow up in the course. Especially by the end of the course they'll be able to talk about idea and talk about themselves in a meaningful and substantive way than they did at the beginning of this semester. Then I'll consider I am successful.

I started the study with the belief that the placement experience would give an opportunity to consider teaching as their future career. However, "make them want to be a teacher is not the goal of this course", the instructor told me. This concept grabbed my attention, since I had taken for granted that students in the teacher preparation program would like to teach and would become a teacher anyway. I came

to realize that students have to understand what teaching really is, then they would be able to decide whether they wanted to be a teacher.

The placement did not go smoothly for everyone, including for Larry; there were some difficulties that emerged from it. Larry explained to me:

...there are some different issues they come up with that give them that difficulty, one is that very practical problem is that they are not, they are a visitor in the classroom, they are not there very much and they are having to establish a working relationship with mentor teacher at the same time they are trying to develop rapport with students and be able to collect data, so they have different responsibilities going on...I hear the most from mentor teachers are student teacher have problems, coming late, leaving early. Sometimes the mentor teacher doesn't like the type of thing they're doing in the classroom...

It is worthwhile to consider the negative field experience of students. Larry has been very careful about the relationship between student teacher and mentor teacher. However, sometimes it is difficult, he told me, "That was tricky because you don't want them to get the idea of that like all mentor teachers are bad, everything said in the university is the right way, everything they do there is wrong, and to be questioned." They would learn the most important lesson in the field placement. Whatever their experiences are positive or negative, it is essential for them to bring into discussion.

- **The instructor incorporates the theoretical concepts of teaching into his practice.**

The course was shaped by practical and theoretical themes. The teaching related

knowledge was based on the require reading that will enable them to examine various conceptions of teaching, and to create meaningful learning opportunities for students.

“To teach: The journey of a teacher of a teacher”, written by Ayers (1993), was one of the required texts. Ayers has taught students at various levels, elementary school through college, but he is influenced most by his experiences with young children and with his own three sons. Vivid anecdotes from his teaching career and from his observations of his sons prevent the text from getting dry or prescriptive. Ayers's principal argument is simple: Students need to be at the center of schooling. He wants schools to base curriculum on individual students, not on behavioral objectives or state mandates.

Another book is “Rethinking classroom: Teaching for equity and justice”, written by Bigelow etc. (2001). The book addresses the issues of race and social justice through the eyes of classroom teachers. Most people have an aversion to talking about race, but the color line continues to divide our society. We have a responsibility to put issues like race on the table. We have to constantly ask ourselves what messages we are sharing with children.

When I asked about the theoretical framework of this course, the instructor told me that “each class will begin with a *short writing assignment* based on the readings for that day”. Students would have opportunities to clarify their understanding of the reading and to form the conception of teaching.

That’s one thing I do in the class. So, basically I use the reading to structure my practice in teaching. One of the main readings, written by Bigelow etc. entitled “Rethinking classrooms: teaching for equity and justice.” You know. That whole book is about diversity. Using difference in your class as an advantage for teaching rather than thinking it is obstacle. I select that book for some reason. It’s really

help to know about diversity...I try to integrate the theory and practice. I understand that teaching is not just technical act. It is not just implementing the strategy...I am trying to integrate theoretical notion of teaching with the practical aspect of what teacher actually do with students. I think that's the main thing I am trying to do in the classroom. Theory and practice integrated in the process of learning how to teach...

Facilitating the discussion in the class is the major activity in Larry's class. This ensures that students understand the theory of teaching emerged from the readings, having students to discuss or criticize. In the course syllabus, it is written as

For each of the class sessions, there will be student discussion leaders who will facilitate the conversation about the issues raised in the readings for part of the class session. When you are the discussion leader, you are required to prepare the content and structure of the discussion. With regard to content, you may want to create scenarios, choose quotations from the readings, or construct questions to which we can respond...

When asked him what kind of question do student in his class ask frequently. He told me, "they often ask the question about how to be the teacher they want and be able to do it, actually do it. This sort of question comes up time and time again".

- **Students have opportunities to reflect on what they are learning in this class**

At the beginning of each class, students are asked to write down their responses or ideas to the reading, or the difficulty and conflict they confront in the field placement. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) provide a strong rationale for the use of narrative

materials in teacher education when they argue that teacher knowledge is generated and passed on through story-telling. Since the late 1980s, many researchers using personal growth and various critically reflective methods to bring about favorable changes to problematic practice have based their inquiry on teachers' written materials, such as journals (Drever and Cope, 1999).

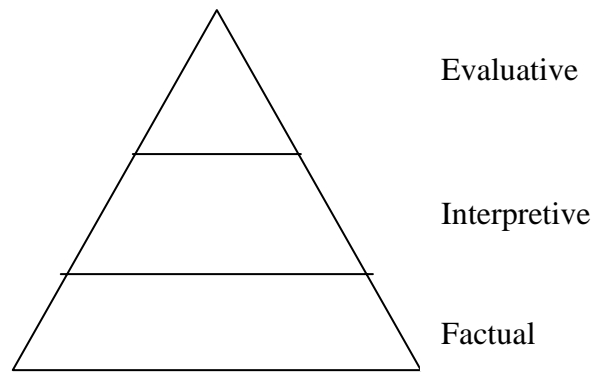
In addition to reflect on the course readings, they are also required to develop three assertions about the student they observed, and “these assertion will be grounded in *evidence* you have collected from your field classroom.” This is a process that enables them to reflect on what they have learned either in the course discussion or in the field experience. I really looked forward to listening their insight on teaching. Before this, I asked the instructor’s perspective.

...developing assertion is difficult; sometimes they are too broad; sometimes they are too narrow; sometimes they are too judgmental. “His parents don’t care about him” something like that, or sometimes they are trying to identify a reason for something and they don’t have enough data to support that, for example, “he doesn’t work because he doesn’t have two parents at home”. I help them develop assertions...

The forth time I observed was their “assertion day.” The discussion was animated. The following is a vignette of the “assertion day”.

### **Vignette**

I come to the class early, approach to an empty chair in the corner. Larry was talking to a female student. The seats in the classroom are all taken. Larry tells them that before they share their assertions he wants to remind them some thing. Larry draws a diagram on the blackboard. It was a triangle, included three element:



He told students when observing in the classroom, “keep these types of questions in mind.” He further defined these questions: Factual— based on what we see. For example students’ physical characteristics, etc. Interpretive— for example the meaning of test. Ask the question of “what is it means?” Evaluative— your or student’s opinion about something, their decision, and their view of world.

“Try not jump to the evaluation without knowing the basis of factual question”, Larry said, “It is easy for us to judge people”. Before the first person talked about her assertion, Larry gave an example of assertion on the board that guided them to talk about their own.

### **Assertion**

- 1) **Content:** Juan knows computational skills in isolation, but has difficulty applying them in word problems.
- 2) **Social:** Juan’s peer relationships are limited in number and closeness.
- 3) **Work Pattern:** The size of the group Juan is in influences his confidence in taking risks.

Mary, a white female student, looked excited, volunteered to go first. “ I observe Bobby, and he is not attracted to do math...” Larry then wrote down what she said on the blackboard:

**Content:** attention spent skills lacking in math.

**Social:** chatterbox at appropriate time with limited  
people.

**Work Pattern:** work effectively independently than relies on  
others when doing math.

Larry suggested that the word “appropriate” needs further explanation.

Jan, another student, said she had established a rapport with the subject she observed, but sometimes she would be frustrated with his unpredictable temper. This is my assertions:

**Content:** difficulty with counting on although seems to  
understand, but most of his answers were  
wrong.

**Social:** feeling easily hurt by peers.

**Work Pattern:** pays attention when present to class when on  
own confidence deteriorates.

Larry explained to me, “before they made the assertion, realizing what kind of question they may address is very important”. Asking question is also a form of reflection.

...the course is essentially about beginning to ask a question about teaching, about teachers, about themselves, about students, and about the place where they work, and about the curriculum being taught, I mean all of these things is to encourage them to ask questions...

I assume that the assertions they made pretty much represented how they see teaching, and their understanding of teaching. Larry in a later interview told me the primary goal of that activity presented in the vignette was to provide an opportunity for preservice teacher to really look at the way of student learning, which would



probably be judged and critiqued without realizing the “real meaning” of what they saw. One of my previous questions was to explore what kinds of understanding and questions about teaching are being revealed by preservice teachers during the class? Thus, I believe through analyzing the assertions they made I can generate the nature of their understanding of teaching. They might not agree with each other, but Larry had provided a room for everyone to respond and to share.

### **Discussion/Conclusion**

The major findings of this study are:

1. The instructor incorporates practical component into his practice
2. The instructor incorporates the theoretical concepts of teaching into his practice.
3. Students have opportunities to reflect on what they are learning in this class

Due to the limited amount of time of the research, I was not able to further inquire some of the interesting and important issue. For example, throughout the semester Larry centralizes the conception “teaching for all students.” Many of the reading, discussion, and activities are around this issue. This conception is quite new to me but it makes me rethink my own idea of teaching. Although many of the schools in Taiwan are culturally diverse, “teaching for all students” has not been an issue. We tend to teach our students without considering their culture, language, and heritage. Do we prepare our teachers to teach all students? Do you equip our teachers with the ability of culturally relevant teaching?

The course, EDCI 280, does not guarantee students’ ability and effectiveness on teaching. Instead, this course aims at introducing the meaning of teaching both theoretically and practically. At the same time, students are offered an opportunity to reflect and challenge their prejudice and attitude.

But this course is not to make them to be ready because they still have many

things to learn. Even they are graduated, they are still not ready for teaching because teaching is so complicated. But I think it's the question whether they want to continue to try to get ready. Whether they feel, for example, enthusiastic, continuing taking this program and learn as much as they can, to prepare themselves as best as possible.

How has Larry done? Does his practice falls in the "training" paradigm, which emphasizes characters like efficiency, competency, prescriptive teaching, and practical experience? Or the "education" paradigm, which emphasizes concern for complexity of knowledge, ongoing reflectivity, theory informing practice? What I found in his teaching is that he tries to help cultivate in his students an awareness of the importance of reflection of teaching. His 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 teaching plays a role in their lives as teachers and the lives of their students as learners. I would conclude that the course, EDCI 280, has roots on both paradigms.

This paper and the thesis, however, provide selected evidence which demonstrates that my research in Larry's class was neither fully objective nor fully neutral. The research was as 'objective' as it was possible for me to make it, but my biases, my self, my personal experience, my dilemmas, and my language hurdle familiarized me with interpretive approach. I sensed my subjectivities all the time. They like sunglasses with various colored lens through which I found different world.

Does what I inquire cover all what I want? I do not think I can. I do not think I would. But no other research has the history I have in my Taiwan experience, no one else has live my life and takes my 'baggage' to the analysis. My ratiocination is unique; it encompasses my truth alone, my subjectivity.

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