Legitimate Peripheral Participation as Professional Development:
Lessons from a Summer Research Seminar

By Ernest Morrell

Introduction

Georgene [A Teacher-Fellow in the Summer Research Seminar]: I feel like I'm learning just as much as the students are and in some ways I'm learning more than I did in some of my classes here at TEP, that… like here you come here and you talk about theory. Then you go to your classroom by yourself and you practice it. Then you come back and you . . . you're always going back and forth. But here in [the summer research seminar] we have it happening all at once. Like we're actually talking about the theories with the kids as we're using them to teach the class. So I . . . I would like to appropriate that model for my class in the fall and basically where I think I'm going to be going with it is there's been a lot of dialogue around forming like more of a coalition between African-American and Latino parents. So I was thinking of maybe framing the class around that, you know that how the two communities can work together. And then things that we might be doing are like just critiquing the school, like what . . . what are some of the practices and policies in the school that have negative effects on these populations. (Comment taken from a teacher-fellow seminar, July 2001)

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Teacher attrition and teacher burnout are among the most serious problems facing urban schools today (Darling-Hammond, 2000). With teachers under constant siege, under resourced, and often under prepared, the revolving door of urban teaching has left schools, and therefore children, in a constant state of flux. These dehumanizing and de-intellectualized conditions of teaching (Freire, 1997; Giroux, 1985) have led many would-be critical educators out of the classroom. Without stable teaching forces in central city schools, students and staffs are at a loss to build networks of trust or engage in long-term, local-level reforms. The recent emphasis on teacher education is important, but it cannot overshadow the need to focus on the teachers who are already in schools. Key components in the struggle for social justice urban schools have to be teacher retention and meaningful professional development.

This article examines a critical research seminar involving urban students and teachers as a site for teacher learning and development. I locate this work within critical and sociocultural traditions to advocate for professional development that is situated in meaningful practice and empowering of teachers as intellectuals and as agents of reform. I describe in detail the summer research seminar of the Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA), a community of practice where urban students and teachers, along with university researchers, come together to investigate issues related to equity and access for marginalized populations within schools. From a variety of sources, including interview and survey data, videotapes of seminar activity, and transcripts from meetings, I articulate four key participation structures that facilitated legitimate peripheral participation during the critical research seminar. I conclude by suggesting ways that learning generated from this seminar can assist teachers, administrators, and teacher-educators who wish to reconsider professional development.

Legitimate Peripheral Participation, Critical Pedagogy, and Learning to Teach for Social Justice

Cultural psychologists believe that people learn as they participate in everyday sociocultural activity (Bruner, 1996; Cole, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991, Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). They critique transmission models of learning often promoted in schools that assume that teachers are sole disseminators of knowledge and that students are empty vessels. Within this school of thought, Lave and Wenger (1991) offer a social practice theory where they contend that learning occurs when new participants are afforded legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice.

As the beginner or newcomer moves from the periphery of this community to its core, they become more active and engaged within the culture and hence assume the role of expert or old-timer. These ideas are what Lave & Wenger (1991) call the process of legitimate peripheral participation:

> Learning viewed as situated activity has as its central defining characteristic a process that we call legitimate peripheral participation. By this we mean to draw attention to the point that learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practice of a community. Legitimate peripheral participation provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. It concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29)

A community of practice is a site of learning and action where participants coalesce around a joint enterprise as they develop a whole repertoire of activities, common stories, and ways of speaking and acting. Communities of practice constitute reality in a particular manner and encourage specialized ways of acting and thinking (Wenger, 1998).

Communities of practice are social sites where people participate in activities as they become certain "kinds of persons." These activities embody distinctive ways that participants relate to each other and the broader world. Learning occurs constantly in these communities as people participate in activities that are more and more central to the core practice. This changing participation leads participants to take on new identities that are necessarily bound up with new knowledge and skills (Lave, 1996).

Drawing upon cultural psychology and critical theory, several theorists have suggested that teachers learn best as they are engaged in collaborative inquiry where they can reflect publicly on their practice, and where they are allowed to position themselves as public and transformative intellectuals (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Freire, 1997; Giroux, 1985; Wells, 2000). Critical pedagogues have contended that teaching is a revolutionary and political act (Apple, 1990; Freire, 1997; McLaren, 1998). McLaren (1998) argues that critical pedagogues are united in their objectives: to empower the powerless and transform existing social inequalities and injustices. A major task of critical pedagogy has been to disclose and challenge the role schools play in our political and cultural life.

Proponents of critical pedagogy suggest that teachers and students must analyze schooling as a cultural and historical process, in which select groups are positioned within asymmetrical relations of power on the basis of specific race, class, and gender groupings. Critical pedagogy attempts to provide teachers, students, parents and other critical researchers with a better means of understanding the role that schools actually play within a race-, class-, and gender-divided society. In this effort, critical theorists have generated categories or concepts for questioning student experiences, texts, teacher ideologies, and aspects of school policy that conservative and liberal analyses too often leave unexplored (McLaren, 1998, p.167).

Building upon a nexus of these theoretical frameworks, several researchers (myself included) at the Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA) at UCLA created a laboratory space for teachers and students to learn as legitimate

peripheral participants in a critical practice that enables them as agents of change in urban schools. A fundamental component of this laboratory space is the summer research seminar.

The Summer Research Seminar

The summer research seminar is a community of practice that brings together urban students and teachers along with university-based researchers, attorneys, and community activists to participate in critical research projects related to equity and access for urban youth. There are multiple layers of participants in the seminar. The 20 to 25 incoming high school seniors, the *research scholars*, are students of color who come to the seminar from high schools all over the Greater Los Angeles area. The four or five critical *teacher fellows* are teachers from urban schools throughout this same area. Generally, these teachers have been graduates of the Teacher Education Program at UCLA, which is committed to urban education and social justice. The *college student ethnographers* include former research scholars who have proceeded to enroll in four-year universities. These students return to help document the seminar activities and to assist the groups and teachers throughout the research process. Finally, there are the *university-based researchers* from the Institute for Democracy, Education and Access (IDEA), from the Graduate School of Education at UCLA, from the sociology department, and from the Law School at the university. Additional participants have come from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and local Community Based Organizations throughout the Los Angeles area.

The critical research at the seminar takes place at three levels. The first is the actual practice of the seminar: Critical research projects put together by urban teachers and students working on issues related to equity and access in urban schools. The second level is the level of the teacher fellows who are investigating their practice in the seminar. These teachers have used this space to think outside of the box and to challenge existing notions of "effective" teaching. The third level of critical research is of the seminar space itself: Thinking about how a systematic investigation of the seminar's activities can inform theories of teaching and learning, literacy development, and critical research.

The summer seminars convene daily from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. and usually last from four to five weeks. The first few weeks are spent introducing the students to the seminar space, to the sociology of education, to each other, and to their specific research topics. During the second week, students usually begin to formulate research questions and collect data related to their topics. The third week involves intensive data collection at school sites, in community centers, and possible interviews with public figures including politicians and high level district administrators. The fourth and fifth weeks are devoted to data analysis and write up. The culmination of the seminar includes a formal presentation to university researchers,

parents, and other community members. The students also submit a research report. During past seminars research teams have investigated student resistance, language practices in local communities, youth access to the media, youth access to public spaces, school safety, standardized testing, the digital divide, and quality teaching in urban schools.

In the following sections, I describe the legitimate peripheral participation of the teacher fellows during one particular seminar. I draw upon several data sources including: Field notes, observations, and reflections, videotaped footage of seminar interactions, audio-recorded and transcribed notes from meetings with teacher-fellows, course evaluations from students, student work products, follow-up phone interviews, and a paper co-written by the teacher fellows that was presented at a national education conference. Although I draw upon data to discuss legitimate peripheral participation, I am not presenting findings per se. Rather, my goals are to use this preliminary foray into a substantial data set to consider how theories of situated learning and critical teaching can influence larger conversations amongst teachers, administrators, and researchers interested in making changes in professional development practices.

Legitimate Peripheral Participation in a Summer Research Seminar

The teacher fellows engaged in multiple forms of legitimate peripheral participation within this community of practice. Though our participants were veteran teachers with experience with urban youth, they were new to the practice of critical research. They needed help selecting readings and topics for research. They needed opportunities to observe and to discuss ideas with more experienced researchers. They also needed the teacher seminar where they could essentially participate as students. These forms of legitimate peripheral participation are supported by the sociocultural theories which suggest that teachers ought to be involved in activity, to be learning by doing (Lave & Wenger, 1991), but they also require opportunities to step back and observe the practice of others, or to receive critical, yet constructive feedback on their own practice. I focus on four participation structures that I feel are most salient to large discussions of the professional development of critical educators: public teaching episodes, co-planning and debriefing sessions, multiple extended observations of professional practice, and the teacher research seminar.

Public Teaching Episodes

> *Ramon [Teacher-Fellow from the Summer Seminar]:* I definitely liked the whole idea of public teaching because it keeps you honest in a way that you are not forced to be when you're by yourself and teaching privately. In an

> ideal world we would be the same in and out of the classroom and we would have more conscious interactions with students. During this seminar someone was always watching — other teachers, the teacher educators, and the group of ethnographers watching your every move. I liked it. I really enjoyed the format and felt a sense of community. Everyone was engaged and invested in the community and the shared process of working towards something and that kept us honest. It was an accountability system without the top-down hierarchical approach we are used to during administrator reviews. (Comment taken from a personal interview response, March 2002)

Public teaching quickly emerged as a unique mode of participation for the teachers, yet one that could contribute to their professional development. Teachers rarely get to watch each other teach and reflect together on the practice witnessed. Even rarer is the reciprocal opportunity for a group of teachers to observe each other teach and interact with a similar group of students. This was a daily occurrence during the seminar, where teacher-fellows engaged in this public pedagogy and then downloaded afterwards in the debriefing sessions.

During these meetings, in the teacher seminars, and in follow-up conversations, teachers expressed that the public teaching made them honest and accountable in ways that teaching in the private confines of the classroom did not. It opened their practice to critical scrutiny from multiple perspectives. Further, the public teaching also meant that, even as legitimate peripheral participants, the teacher fellows were also teacher educators in that their practice was geared toward adult teachers as well as student-researchers. The teachers commented that this added scrutiny led to greater preparation and sensitivity on their part while also generating more specific and substantive dialogue about the practice of teaching.

A major downside, however, is that the public accountability to peers also led to increased nervousness and anxiety. Though it is necessary for teachers to be accountable to their peers, this process should not add to the anxiety and stress of an already taxing job. The seminar participants frequently struggled with their own insecurities while trying to make the public space as safe as possible for others.

Co-planning and Debriefing Sessions

> *Georgene:* I felt very comfortable teaching publicly because I trusted everyone and never felt like I was under scrutiny. I felt very supported by the other teachers, because after class we would talk to each other and give each other feedback. In the teacher meetings after class we would talk to give each other feedback and pat each other on the back after a good lesson, something I never get to do at my regular school. (Comment taken from a personal interview)

Each day, after the conclusion of the seminar, teacher fellows and university

researchers would meet as a research team to discuss the day's events, to raise questions and concerns, and to plan for the following day's activities. These sessions were often difficult for teachers and university researchers who were not used to having their practice critically interrogated by others. Even when said in compassionate ways, criticism can hurt and lead to insecurity and defensiveness. Moments of tension erupted and relationships were tested though, in retrospect, all of the participants attested to the necessity of the critical dialogue.

Part of the apprenticeship process involved helping the teacher-fellows to have the confidence to fully distance themselves from problematic teaching practices of which they were already skeptical. For instance, they were asked to avoid didactic teaching practices and preparation. Teachers were forced to react to the emergent interests of the students while attempting to complete a coherent, collaboratively created research project. The co-planning and debriefing sessions allowed the teacher-fellows opportunities to express tentative ideas and revise research hypotheses. They also allowed the teacher-fellows to seek advice on how to bring the critical research projects to fruition, including: developing mini-activities to teach specific concepts, adding supplementary readings, finding additional sites for data collecting, and thinking about strategies for data analysis and write up.

Multiple Extended Observations of Professional Practice

> *Adee [Teacher Fellow from the Summer Research Seminar]:* I was able to see different teachers deal with situations differently. I saw things that I would have never considered until I saw it in action. This not only gave me new pedagogical methods to use, it also gave me the courage to try some of the revolutionary methods that I was nervous about implementing. These teachers helped me see that I was on the right path (Comment taken from a personal interview).

Another unique structure of participation entailed multiple extended observations of professional practice. During the normal course of the seminar, teacher-fellows and university researchers would each take responsibility for small segments of the large group interactions, including leading discussions about core readings, the research process, and preparing for presentations. In addition, a colleague and I, who were co-directors of the seminar, would visit the small research groups to assist with the research process. This provided each teacher-fellow the opportunity to watch at least six other professionals interact with a common set of students over a four-week period.

These multiple observations engendered conversations, even debates about styles, approaches, and philosophies that are often absent from the culture of teaching. These conversations forced teachers to reflect more fully on their own practice as they witnessed others in action. Over the course of the seminar, the group

members developed a shared understanding and respect of one another's practice, while at times it was necessary to agree to disagree.

Teacher-Fellow Seminar

> *Ramon:* Interesting you bringing up that. I was just reading the Freire thing today and I can't find it now, but something . . . he said something, paraphrasing him, something about there being no topic that's inappropriate to talk about with children and that, you know . . . and I think that's common with my beliefs that students aren't too young to learn about genocide, conflict. You can frame it in a way that is developmentally appropriate that you can talk about those. But it's like in my . . . my belief that children are never too young to hear the truth. (Comment taken from Teacher-Fellow Seminar)

As a companion to the student critical research seminar, a seminar was created for the teacher-fellows and other teachers in the Greater Los Angeles area entitled "Teaching Critical Research: A Seminar of, by, and for Transformative Urban Teachers." This course, which met once a week during the evenings, was designed as an inquiry-based discussion and writing seminar in which participants would bring in and share writing about experiences with critical research and make plans for forging new models of such work. The discussion and writing touched upon: theories of public/organic intellectuals and public spaces for critical teacher work, questions of identity and of critical intelligence in public life, sociocultural learning theory, critical pedagogy and its applications to urban teaching, critical social theory (as it relates to education and youth), and engaging young people in critical research process. In effect, this teacher seminar acted as a research seminar, in which teacher-fellows shared, developed, and elaborated their existing understandings based upon experience and forge new understandings that they would test out in practice.

Teacher-fellows used this seminar to ask difficult questions about the literature, especially at the level of operationalizing concepts for application in the classroom. Teacher-fellows were also able to situate themselves in relation to the readings and discuss their own philosophies of teaching and learning, as Ramon's comment attests. Most importantly, the seminar provided an opportunity for teachers to plan, to consider how their experiences in the student seminar and with the readings would inform their pedagogy once they returned to their traditional classrooms. The final project of the teacher-fellow seminar entailed developing a plan for engaging in critical research with students or parents at their school site.

Before discussing the implications of legitimate peripheral participation in a critical research community for teacher training and professional development, I'd like to consider the indications that meaningful learning took place among the students and teachers that participated in the seminar. Preliminary analyses of survey and interview data suggest that students felt that they learned, that they

enjoyed the seminar, and that they saw themselves as becoming critical researchers. The survey and interview data of student attitudes are supported by observational notes of students working well into the night to finish projects that would receive no grade and of students staying after seminar during their summer vacation to participate in protests or other activism related to equity and access. The observational notes and videotape data also capture student and teacher engagement in the sociocultural activity of the seminar.

Student work products (presentations, reports, journal entries, essays, articles for publication) reveal student awareness of and facility with critical research methods. Conversations and interviews with distinguished university faculty that interacted with the teachers and students detail the serious work of the summer seminar and the quality of the work products associated with the seminar. Student work not only facilitated academic literacies, their critical projects have been accessed in academic courses at the university, on practitioner and activist-oriented websites, in school newspapers, and in policy debates at the local and state levels.

In interviews and personal writings, the teachers admitted to participating very differently in their schools and communities after the seminar. One teacher started an after school class that allowed for students to learn about their cultural histories and participate in critical research and activism for social change in their school and community. Another teacher led a student march on the capitol in support of a student bill of rights. All of the teachers talked with others and wrote about their experiences in the summer seminar. These writings appeared in memos to colleagues, articles in an online teaching journal, and a presentation to an annual meeting of educational researchers.

Teachers also participated differently in their classrooms as a result of their work with the seminar. Several discussed instituting more humanizing pedagogy and more activity-centered spaces. Teachers sought out additional resources and developed projects that were situated in the lived experiences and struggles of students in their communities. However, the teachers also mentioned the struggles they faced attempting to implement all of their learning into traditional classroom spaces, given the lack of time, and pressures from state mandated curricula and standardized tests. These additional pressures make it difficult to discern the impact of professional development by merely observing the classroom practice of teachers. It is also important to talk with teachers, to see how their thinking has changed, or how they use non-classroom spaces to enact new pedagogies.

Conclusion:

Considerations for Professional Development

Joanna: The seminar was so much more powerful, authentic, and meaningful than the other professional development opportunities I had engaged in. Most of them consist of experts disseminating lesson plans or

> their own pedagogical perspectives on the listening teachers. This information may provide a mismatch with my own classroom community. [The summer research seminar] rooted the teaching with the learning. Who came up with the idea that it was effective to take away students when trying to improve teaching? It was nice to embed the development within the practice, and was quite helpful to watch and learn from the other teachers. I found myself listening to students a lot more, and imagining the possibilities for education based on this model. The support and humanizing aspect of this seminar reminded me that I don't teach mathematics, I teach students. (Comment taken from a personal interview)

Learning from the seminar indicates that professional development is informative and enabling when it is a situated activity, when teachers are allowed to work with one another in the context of solving real problems related to their critical practice. Development, even for veteran teachers, should have spaces for legitimate peripheral participation. That is, the participation must be useful to the practice, but not the core of the practice. Peripheral participants also need access to all that full membership entails. In this case, the teacher-fellows were able to observe and interact with veteran critical researchers on a variety of levels.

Following Freire (1997), professional development, learning and re-learning to teach, necessitates that teachers have ample time to write and reflect about their emergent practice. Legitimate peripheral participation implies that teachers need spaces to be humble about their practice and ask naïve questions without feeling threatened or inadequate. So much of the urban teacher's identity consists of contesting images of inadequacy and ineptitude. Without being humble, seeing one's self as a learner among learners, it is impossible to learn or grow as a professional.

The teachers who participated in the summer seminar also benefited from both witnessing and enacting successful practice. Darling-Hammond (1997) refers to laboratory settings where teachers were able to observe successful teaching practices over a number of weeks. Following in this vein, we attempted to create laboratory-like conditions where teachers had the time, space, and resources needed to focus explicitly on their own practice while observing the expert practice of others.

Finally, professional development for the urban teacher should be an intellectual and humanizing experience. Every component of the research seminar, from changing the titles to research fellows and checking out laptops, to offering an evening seminar for graduate credit, was meant to treat the teachers as transformative intellectuals and subjects committed to teaching for social justice. Often, teacher pedagogy, whether at the pre-service or in-service level, embodies the very deficit orientations that we seek to eliminate from K-12 classrooms.

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