

**Thinking, teaching and learning like an ethnographer:
Possibilities for emancipatory teacher inquiry**

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Abstract

I want to suggest that 'thinking like an ethnographer' in our classrooms opens us to new ways of seeing our students and to understanding teaching and learning. I offer some suggestions/imaginings about what this might mean in my own and others' classrooms.. I will also draw on a two-year research project looking at narrative assessment to show how teaching participant observation can broaden teachers' understandings of classrooms as sites where identities are negotiated and re-negotiated through everyday classroom practices.

Introduction

In thinking about this paper I had in mind a number of questions about using ethnography in the classroom. These questions arose from ideas discussed with my students. I don't necessarily offer any answers here; I'm interested to hear how others may have taken up these ideas.

- How might teachers who have completed theses using the tools and understandings of ethnography continue to use what they've learned in their classrooms? (How might teachers move beyond using the substantive findings of a thesis project, or its implications for classroom practice?)

- What might make it possible to think like an ethnographer while in the moment of teaching and learning, planning curriculum, carrying out and acting upon assessment?
- What does it mean to think like an ethnographer?
- How might thinking like an ethnographer contribute to being a reflective and reflexive practitioner?

I don't wish to invoke or to perpetuate a researcher- teacher dichotomy. I do not want to assert teachers should be something else, or that they need to be researchers. Yet, if one meaning of research is to deepen one's understanding of 'what is going on here?' then what else helps teachers (including myself) to do this?

I'd like to start by acknowledging two sources for the idea of thinking like an ethnographer when I think about teaching and learning in my own and others' classrooms. The first is an article by Bill Wansart I read 15 years ago, and then recently rediscovered. The second is a two-year project working with teachers to develop a national resource in NZ using narrative assessment. I suggest that both of these sources provide a strong argument for helping teachers to think and act like ethnographers in their daily classroom practices.

Teaching as a way of knowing

Wansart's (1995) article was titled 'Teaching as a way of knowing: Observing and responding to students' abilities' and published in a special issue of *Remedial and Special Education*. Wansart opens his paper stating

Teacher research is about the knowledge created when teachers seek to discover the stories the students reveal about themselves as learners...

Teacher researchers observe and describe the details of individual learners within the context of the classroom, the family and the community...

Teacher researchers collect and combine their observations so that they may understand and interpret what students are telling them about their learning. Their primary purpose is to allow these stories of ability to change their teaching as they respond to their developing understanding of each student. (pp.166-167)

Wansart is of course describing the tools of ethnography, participant observation with its rich description of context and conversations. He is also describing the aims of ethnography, to understand the perspectives of participants and the meanings they make of and give to their lives.

Wansart draws on the work of Ferguson, Ferguson and Taylor (1992), *Interpreting disability: A qualitative reader* concluding with these authors that one purpose of telling stories, particularly the stories of traditionally disadvantaged and groups, with the explicit purpose of improving what happens in the classroom. Wansart notes that when teachers report their work about listening to students' stories, they often tell transformative stories:

In deciding which stories will prevail in the narrative, teacher researchers present evidence that student stories *can* prevail if teachers attend to them. When shared in this way, the understanding of student ability and accomplishment that teachers develop in the classroom may additionally

influence the instructional practices of other teachers who recognize these stories. (p.168)

Halquist and Musanti (2010) discuss the relationship between critical incidents and reflection. They call these “Turning points that challenge the researcher and create opportunities for knowing” (p.449). They note that critical incidents are created, rather than simply ‘out there’ and waiting to be uncovered. What makes a particular incident critical is “our interpretation of the significance of an event” (p.450). The element of surprise is usually a key element in deciding that an incident is critical. The surprise can in turn invite reflection on the event and deeper analysis of the event: participants may “identify, or make visible, aspects of their own lives and/or practice that may be hidden or have gone unnoticed” (p.455).

Narrative assessment

In New Zealand we use narrative assessment to *notice*, *recognise* and *respond* to children’s learning. These are key verbs: notice, recognise and respond. I’ll return to these in a moment. In a nutshell, we support teachers and other adults in the school, students and their families to write stories about children’s learning, both in and beyond the classroom. We are able to do this in New Zealand because we have curricula that are, in important aspects, explicitly socio-cultural in their views of teaching and learning.

There are two sets of resources, *curriculum exemplars* that support teacher’s professional learning to use narrative assessment. Curriculum

exemplars take authentic examples of student learning, and annotate these examples to the curriculum. The exemplars illustrate teachers' thinking about which aspects of the curriculum are evident in a given example of a student's learning.

The first set of exemplars is for *Te Whaariki* – the *New Zealand Early Childhood Education Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2004-2009). Margaret Carr led the development of this set of exemplars, drawing on theories of narrative developed by Clandinin and Connelly. Bronwen Cowie has also been very influential in her development of narrative to understand learning in secondary science classrooms.

The second set is the *Curriculum Exemplars for Students with Special Educational Needs* (Ministry of Education, 2009a). It is this second set I want to focus on here. There is also a resource to accompany the exemplars, *Narrative Assessment: a guide for teachers* (Ministry of Education, 2009b). The development of these exemplars was informed in part by key tenets of Disability Studies in Education; in particular a rejection of the medical discourse of disability in favour of presumptions of competence, and privileging the interests, agendas, and voices of people labeled with disability/disabled people (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher & Morton, 2009).

In both sets of exemplars, teachers are invited to look at their students and their students' learning, through a somewhat different lens. The approach to assessment is based on an understanding of curriculum and meanings as co-constructed, contextual and interactional. This approach is different to more

traditional understandings of learning as demonstrating progression, that teachers already know what the learning will look like for every student, and assessment is about looking and listening *for* evidence of that learning.

In narrative assessment, a different kind of attention is called for; that of attending *to*, listening *to* a student or group of students. In learning to write the exemplars for students with special educational needs, teachers were encouraged first to write little jottings or take photos of, what they considered to be ‘wow’ moments in the life of the classroom. We were supporting the teachers to *notice* things the students had done. We then met as a group, to share and talk about these wow moments in their classrooms or on the playgrounds. In describing why the moment was ‘wow’ for them, the teachers then described what they thought they knew about the students in the stories, how they had previously documented students learning (or lack of learning), and how these had led to somewhat low expectations.

We encouraged the teachers to elaborate further on their jottings and stories: what else was going on? What were they, the teachers and storywriters, doing at the time? We encouraged the teachers to put themselves, their ideas and feelings, into the stories. We then met with other teachers who were very familiar with all of the aspects of the New Zealand school curriculum – curriculum facilitators. Together the curriculum facilitators and the teacher storywriters began to identify how the story linked to the various learning areas of the NZ curriculum. We were supporting the teacher storywriters to *recognise* these wow

moments as students showing what they were learning or had sometimes long ago learned, and the teachers were only now recognising as learning.

For all of us involved in the development of these exemplars, the experiences of noticing and recognising students' learning were electrifying. The website for the resource is called *Through different eyes*. This was a phrase the teachers used repeatedly to describe how they now saw their students – the students were now ascribed identities as learners. The teacher storywriters also saw themselves differently; also as learners, and as advocates for their students.

Discussion

I think that many of the ideas and practices described by Wansart (1995) and others have been lost in the sea of numbers, accountability and so-called evidence-based practice. I am optimistic that the development of the curriculum exemplars resources in NZ offers a chance to embed some ethnographic ways of thinking and strategies in teachers' practices. I suspect one implication is that we don't wait for graduate school to teach teachers about qualitative research, or to limit reading of qualitative research to studies of the sociology of education.

Adopting a disability studies (critical pedagogy) framework moved the teachers' stories beyond mere description of what they already knew was there. A disability studies perspective supported documenting moments of surprise and the 'creation' of critical incidents, the 'wow' moments could be first noticed, then recognised as learning. Sharing the stories of learning created new and more enriching possibilities for students, teachers and families.

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