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Once the Door Is Closed: An Ethnographic Description of One Content-Based English Language Program as Four Teachers Implemented It

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Abstract

In the mid-1980s, the federal government designated the community in which this study was conducted as a relocation site for Southeast Asian refugees. The local school district received more than 300 students in grades k-8 from Cambodia and Laos. The students had limited formal schooling, had lived in refugee camps for 2-5 years, and less than 5% spoke any English. The district director asked me to work with the teachers and a consultant to develop a program to teach academic subjects to the students while they learned English. Together we designed an ethnographic study to document the program implementation process, understand the ways the program was implemented in individual classrooms, and identify effective instructional practices to work with refugee students who had little or no English or formal schooling. This PhD case details the process and methods of conducting an ethnographic study in a school district, including entry into the field, earning the trust of the participants, and the importance of long-term on-site participant observation. It examines the role of assumptions I made as an ethnographer and the need to make explicit those assumptions and understand their impact on the research design and data collection.

Learning Outcomes

This case examines the challenges of conducting an ethnography and being a participant observer in a professional context with which one is familiar. By the end of the case, you should have a better understanding of the following:

- The importance of the subjective or one's own perceptions/beliefs about the research site and participants and the role those perceptions can play in guiding the questions asked by an ethnographer
 - The importance of sustained, long-term, on-site participant observation in ethnographic research to allow for the "real" research questions to emerge from the data and to allow for trust to develop with participants so that the social processes being studied can unfold as "naturally" as possible
 - The need for complete confidentiality and discretion in reporting the data with respect to gaining the trust of the participants
 - The importance of the social and historical context in shaping present-day events and participants' perceptions of those events
 - The pros and cons of ethnography as a method to document the emic perspective and lived lives of participants in institutional settings, in this case a public school district
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Project Overview and Context

In the spring of 1984, I was asked to provide in-service training to a group of teachers in the southeastern

United States. For several years, their community had received refugees from Cuba and other South American countries. I assumed that the teachers needed strategies for teaching Spanish-speaking refugees and immigrants with limited formal schooling. After the workshop, I learned that I was wrong. The community had recently been designated as a cluster/relocation site for Southeast Asian refugees, primarily from Cambodia and Laos. In 2 years, the schools had received more than 300 students from these countries. Most of the students had lived for 2-5 years in refugee camps. They had limited schooling, and less than 5% spoke any English. A few were children of educated professionals. Most were not, and their lack of familiarity with the US culture and the culture of school all contributed to their high failure rates. The teachers had no idea how to teach these students, and I didn't either. There had been almost no studies of their languages or educational systems, and no research had been done to identify effective educational practices for working with this newest population of refugees.

In May after the workshop, the district director asked me to work with teachers from two schools and another consultant to design a program for the Southeast Asian refugee students. They wanted to have self-contained multi-grade classrooms in which the teachers would be responsible for language arts, math, social studies, and science. The goal was to document the process of program implementation and use information gained from the project to train teachers at other schools in the district. As a result of this collaboration, I developed my PhD research project: an 18-month ethnographic study that would document the program implementation process from the perspective of four teachers: two at one elementary school and two at one junior high school. I wanted to understand the classroom-level reality of program implementation from the teachers' perspectives as it was reflected in their daily classroom lives and practices of over an entire school year.

When I began this project, there were no studies of the implementation process of programs designed to teach refugee students. The few studies that were available relied on surveys or outcome data such as standardized tests to document program effectiveness. As McLaughlin and Talbert noted, much implementation research "keeps teachers' daily work lives in the shadows [and] pays only lip service to [the] teachers' role in planning and implementing change" (p. 29). Other than Wolcott, the review of literature further documented the lack of attention to teachers' perspectives. The purpose of my study became one of documenting how the four teachers understood what it meant to educate the refugees and how their understandings influenced the instructional programs that they developed and implemented in their classrooms. I also wanted to understand the role that social context played and how policy decisions at the district and school level influenced the teachers and program implementation at the classroom level.

Research Practicalities

Primary data collection for this doctoral study was conducted from May 1984 through July 1985. More than 900 hr of fieldwork were conducted in four classrooms. I also observe in two other classrooms, but due to a change in the teachers' assignments, their data were not used in the final dissertation. I was on-site in the schools 2-3 days per week for an entire school year. In addition, I spent hundreds of hours outside

of school. I stayed at the teachers' homes when I was on-site; attended refugee community functions; and interviewed district personnel, personnel working at several refugee relocation organizations, and supervisors at local plants where parents worked. I spent hours learning about the social context of the school district by reading prior years of local papers and other archived documents—such as district and teachers' union newsletters, reports, and federal grant documents. Follow-up interviews were conducted and additional data were collected the following academic year. The purpose of the additional data collection was to clarify questions that emerged from the data analysis process.

As an ethnographer, my goal was to document the program as the four teachers implemented it. I was not there to judge but to understand and answer what Wolcott termed the ethnographer's most basic question: "What is going on here? And why?" In order to do this, I had to gain entry into the field, gain the trust of the teachers and district personnel, and be a participant observer over an extended period of time. I also had to identify elements of the school district and context within which the teachers worked and understand how those elements influenced program implementation. A final challenge was that of designing a study that met the needs of the participants, in this case the school district, as well as mine. Each of these elements had its own challenges that needed to be resolved.

Challenge 1: Entry Into the Field

Identifying a site and participants is not enough when working in the public schools. One must gain permission to actually conduct the study. In school settings, district administration and school board approval is usually required. Once the district supervisor, principals, and teachers had approved what I wanted to do, I had to prepare a proposal for the assistant superintendent to present to the school board. This meant knowing when the board meetings were to be held so that I could write the proposal, get input from the participants, revise, and submit the proposal in time to get it approved by the board before the school year started. Once the study was approved formally, the consent-to-participate letters had to be signed by the principals and teachers. I also had to have the letter of consent to participate translated into Khmer and signed by the parents of students and the students whose work would be included in the study.

Challenge 2: Gaining Trust

Three months onto the study, I learned an important lesson: gaining entry to the field site and gaining the trust of the participants were two separate things. Because of the curriculum development work that we had done over the summer, I naively believed when I began the study in September that I was perceived by the teachers as a member of the team whom they could trust. I realized in early December that I was wrong. I had arrived at the school ready to observe in two classes. I learned that the school schedule had changed due to a field trip. I had to change my observation schedule and observe two teachers who were not expecting me until the following week. One of the teachers was not happy with the change of schedule. During that observation, the lesson did not go well, and several students were misbehaving.

That night, I went back through my fieldnotes for that teacher and compared prior lessons with the one I had just observed. Those lessons were different, and it occurred to me that because she knew when I was coming, she had in all likelihood scripted her lessons. They were too perfect, and there weren't any notes describing misbehavior by the students. As I read through lesson fieldnotes for the other teachers, I found the same thing for some of the earlier lessons. It was then that I realized that for this teacher especially, I had not been observing the natural implementation of the program. Rather, I had been observing what she thought I wanted to see and what she thought she "should be doing" to implement the program.

The Impact of the Social Context on the Teachers

At this point, I asked three more questions: Why did the teachers feel the need to script lessons? Why didn't this teacher and maybe the others trust me, and what were the reasons? I knew I couldn't ask the teachers directly, so I decided to use archival data to try and answer the questions. I read archived teacher union newsletters and the local newspaper. I learned that 20 years earlier, there was a political event that had destroyed all trust between the teachers, the union, and the administration. The event had firmly established a top-down hierarchy in the district.

The current superintendent had been a key player in that event and completely supported that hierarchical approach. In his first 2 years in office, there were more than 250 articles in the *Urbantown Times* documenting his policies, public and teacher reaction to those policies, and effects those policies had on the school district. His first action was to implement the School Board's proposed plan for grade-level testing in all elementary schools. The results of the standardized tests were then reported each year in the *Urbantown Times*. Average scores were reported by school, and, when applicable, district averages were compared with those of other districts. Once I understood more of this history, I had some informal interviews with administrative personnel to better understand the superintendent's influence on the present social context.

When I conducted my study, the county emphasis on test scores as a measure of teacher excellence was still strong. It represented an important aspect of the social context within which the Content-Based English Program (CBEP) was implemented. At the elementary school included in the study, for example, test scores for each teacher by grade level were graphed and posted on six large wall-charts in the cafeteria. Teachers were ranked according to how well students had done on state and district tests. The principal and many of the faculty considered teachers with the highest scores to be the best teachers and those with the lowest to be the worst. The pressure to get the students to pass the tests was intense. No matter how the CBEP teachers personally felt about validity of the testing for the newly arrived refugee students or as a measure of their success as teachers, the reality was that the administration's top priority was preparing students for testing and attaining high student test scores.

Clarifying My Role and Establishing Trust

I used the knowledge that I gained from my archival research and interviews to talk to the district supervisor and the teachers about the present context under the superintendent. Through these conversations, I learned

that my perception of my status as a "team player" and the status that the teachers had ascribed to me were very different. Because I was referred to as the "evaluator," the teachers had perceived me as being a member of the administration. The teachers were concerned that I was "watching them," evaluating their performance and instruction, and reporting back to the district supervisor.

The teacher who had reluctantly let me observe her unscripted lesson told me that she thought that she was required to participate and that she couldn't say no to my request to make an unscheduled observation. When I reminded her and the other teachers that the letter of consent to participate guaranteed confidentiality and that they could refuse to participate at any time, her response was "I didn't believe you." I learned that all of the teachers were concerned that I was reporting back to the district administration and did not think that I kept my fieldnotes and interview data confidential. They believed that I was there to evaluate them.

Actions Taken to Establish Trust

In January, I spent time talking with the teachers about the reason for the study and why I wanted to observe and document how they implemented the program. I explained that my goal, with their participation, was to understand the best ways to educate the refugees in their classes so that the information could be shared with other teachers and districts facing similar issues. I told them that I did not know which methods would work and enable the students to learn. Ideally, the study would identify effective practices and result in a curriculum model based on methods and strategies that could be used to teach English and grade-level academic content to refugees and other immigrants with no English skills and limited formal schooling. That critical incident was what I consider to be the turning point in my study. Although I do not think that the one teacher ever completely trusted me, the others did.

I started sharing my fieldnotes with the teachers after my classroom observations. The purpose was to get their feedback and assure accuracy. I also shared how I was coding the notes. Once they understood what I was doing and that I was the only one reading the notes, the level of trust increased. I also made sure that I never repeated to another teacher what someone had shared with me. In the final 6 months of the study, I was able to document the daily classroom lives of the teachers as they worked to understand their students and implement the content-based program. The teachers were comfortable with my dropping in to observe, and I was able to document the natural unfolding of the program.

Challenge 3: Meeting the Needs of the District

Although my goal was one of developing a model to teach English and academic content to refugee and immigrant students with limited schooling, I also had to acknowledge the district's needs and design a study that would meet those needs as well. One condition for my being allowed to do the study was to collect data on the academic growth of the students. I designed this aspect of the study with the district administrator in charge of the English as a second language and bilingual education programs. We reviewed a variety of tests used to measure English ability and determined that they did not measure academic content. We finally decided that I would administer the Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT) to get a baseline of the students'

academic knowledge and the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test as a measure of their English. The WRAT was used in the district to place students in an appropriate grade. Both tests reported scores in terms of age and grade. I also applied for and received permission from the district's Office of Educational Testing to have access to the students' data on the standardized tests administered at the end of the year and for 1 year after the ethnographic portion of the study was completed. In September, I created a testing schedule and personally administered the WRAT and Peabody individually to 150 students. Testing took about 20 min to half an hour per student and took all month. I also tested approximately 120 students in May, as 30 had moved from the district and were no longer in the program. By collaborating with the district supervisor on the design of this component of the study, meeting the district's needs became the easiest challenge to address.

Data Collection and Analysis

The primary sources of data were extensive transcribed fieldnotes for each teacher that I took at each classroom observation during the school year. I also transcribed ethnographic interviews that I conducted with the teachers, district administrators, community members, students, and parents. Additional sources included written observations following participation in district and community events and a variety of archival materials.

I used the program goals to develop the central question guiding the initial phase of my research:

What happens when teachers who do not share a common language, a common culture, or a core of similar life experiences with their students attempt to teach English and the academic knowledge and skills students will need for placement in the regular academic classrooms where only English is spoken?

Additionally, I was interested in questions such as the following:

1. What problems do the CBEP teachers face as they go about their daily work?
2. What do teachers mean when they say they are educating refugees, and do their definitions and expectations change over the year?
3. What are the teachers' educational aims, and how are they reflected in classroom practice?

Data Analysis

Data analysis was an ongoing and arduous process. I continuously transcribed fieldnotes, analyzed data, and asked new questions. My goals were to understand the challenges the teachers faced as they implemented the CBEP, document the kinds of decisions they had to make in terms of curriculum and lesson planning, and identify practices that supported the refugees learning English and academic subjects. To meet this goal, I chose the Developmental Research Sequence Method (DRSM) developed by Spradley for the initial analysis of the data. The DRSM is a hierarchical approach to data analysis in which fieldnotes are analyzed

as domains, taxonomies, and components to create "cultural domains." I thought that the DRSM would help me to organize the data; compare, contrast, analyze, and synthesize the observations I had documented in my fieldnotes; and make comparisons across teachers.

Critical Incident 2: Refocusing the Study

In December, 3 months into the study, it became clear from my data analysis that the four teachers were doing very different things in their classrooms. Basically, the DRSM method analysis showed that there was no one CBEP. I almost quit. When I went to discuss this with my major advisor, his response was, "I think you have found your true research question."

This was the second critical incident during the study. Once I documented that there was no one program being implemented, I wanted to understand why. Through further discussion with my dissertation chair and analysis of early fieldnotes, I identified assumptions I had made when I developed the study. These assumptions influenced the development of the initial research questions and data collection. As an experienced teacher familiar with school district bureaucracy and classroom instructional planning, I had framed the research question from my perspective as a teacher, not as a researcher. I had entered the field with some expectations as to what I would find and how the program implementation process would unfold. As a result, I had focused on the wrong thing. I had assumed that the teachers would implement one program and that I would be able to identify common practices across all grade levels. From the identification of these practices, I believed that a model for teaching refugees with no English skills and limited schooling would emerge from the data.

Action Taken: Develop New Questions

When I realized that there was no program, the focus of my study evolved into understanding why. I developed two questions that guided the next phase of the study:

1. Why did teachers who ostensibly were working from a common set of assumptions and were working together to develop common program guidelines end up implementing such radically different programs?
2. What biographical, contextual, and organizational factors influenced the teachers' social construction of the programs they implemented?

Rather than studying best practices, I wanted to know how school district policies and contexts derail education reforms and prevent or support teachers as they work to implement research-based programs and educate refugees. After further data analysis, I added two more questions:

3. Of the many potential problems that the four teachers faced everyday, which do individual teachers recognize and act upon, which do they recognize and fail to act upon, and which do they fail to recognize at all?

4. If differences exist in problem recognition or how the teachers worked to solve problems, what accounted for those differences in perception and/or action?

Action Taken: Choose an Additional Analysis Method

Once I began to understand the different assumptions the teachers were making about what I originally assumed to be a commonly held experience of implementing one program, I looked for an additional analysis technique that would help me to analyze and understand the teachers' perspectives. I chose the theoretical framework of symbolic interaction as articulated by Blumer and developed in the writings of Mead (in Miller and in Strauss) and Berger and Luckman. Zadrorny defines that symbolic interactionism

is an approach to understanding human conduct which is based on the view that the human is primarily an active, goal-seeking person (not merely a responsive organism), that the stimuli toward which he acts are selected and interpreted by him, and that social interaction occurs in terms of these significant symbols. (p. 339)

The phenomenological perspective of Alfred Schutz and Webb was also helpful. I chose the symbolic interaction theory because of its attention to the individual as an active participant in the construction of his or her reality we term everyday life.

The framework that I used to analyze the teachers' perspectives combined the theories of Alfred Schutz and a field-data analysis method developed by Gubrium. Gubrium derived his method from symbolic interaction theory and a series of research studies he conducted of social organization in different human service institutions. Specifically, the method applies to the analysis of field data gathered using ethnographic research methods. Gubrium viewed "inter-subjective reality as a basis for meaning production and reproduction, and challenges the idea that there is a 'real world' lying behind the symbols and beliefs we hold" (p. 5). The central focus of the method is uncovering and understanding the structures of relevance—prior beliefs, experiences, and understandings—that frame a person's perceptions and interpretations about the objective world.

Summary of Findings

In this section, I briefly summarize the findings. A detailed analysis and discussion for each of the four teachers is included in the dissertation. While the four teachers were ostensibly implementing the same program, the analysis documented reasons why two of the teachers were not successful educating the students and two of the teachers were. The differences between the two pairs of teachers illustrate the importance of the individual in the program implementation process. They also illustrate the effects that school district administrative culture and values can have on classroom practice.

Hierarchy and Compliance Versus Shared Status and Discovery

Although a number of differences emerged from the data regarding the contrast between the pairs of

teachers, the most striking was the adherence to hierarchy and compliance with administrative requests and procedures. In one interview, one of the less successful teachers said, "I know what the administration wants, and I give it to them."

The programs one pair of teachers constructed were informed by school and district standards, curriculum guides, and administrative directives. In their classrooms, most of the instructional interactions that occurred were based on relationships in which the teachers presented predetermined information to the students. Primary sources of validation for these teachers included adherence to administrators' requests and expert sources, such as the CBEP curriculum guide and the basic skill lists. In their classrooms, students ritualistically performed spelling tests, filled out ditto sheets, colored, and copied in accordance with standards teachers set based on what they were told to do by the administration or what they thought the administration wanted. When the teachers were publicly recognized by the administration for having implemented the CBEP materials as directed, the appropriateness of their decisions and their instructional practices were confirmed.

This approach to instruction supported findings by prior researchers such as Rosenholtz:

teachers, like members of most organizations, shape their beliefs and actions largely in conformance with the structures, policies, and traditions of the workaday world around them... . Teachers in a particular school have always acted in certain ways, and they will go on acting in those ways because it is "natural" that they should do so.

In the above quotation, teachers are viewed as having a herd mentality. Whatever the school faculty does, all teachers do. Although it is not stated, the above quotation implies that teachers do not reflect and consciously act but conform their beliefs and actions to those of the school faculty and administration. When researchers see teachers from this perspective, they may fail to recognize that not all faculty members conform. They do not define the workaday world identically and they do not all teach alike.

Resistance and Non-Compliance

The two teachers who successfully taught the Southeast Asian refugee students socially constructed understandings with their students. Their students validated them as teachers rather than adherence to administrative directives. They worked to understand their students' perspectives of the world and developed their ability to see the information, skills, and concepts they presented from their students' perspectives. Both teachers reconstructed the curriculum and materials they were given to meet students' rather than the administration's needs. The Southeast Asian aide in one classroom helped the teacher understand the students and helped the students understand the teacher, her instructional style, and what she expected. The other teacher came to understand her students by watching and questioning those who spoke some English, their classmates' background, their lives, and their school experiences. When communication broke down, both teachers encouraged students to help one another.

Through social interaction, the teachers actively constructed a shared social world in their classrooms in

which students and the teachers were members of learning communities. They critically examined the standards and materials they were given and worked to adapt those standards to fit the actual educational needs of their Southeast Asian students.

Implications of the Study

The above findings point to a neglected issue of educational reform. Teachers come to the classroom with different knowledge, skills, and understandings about the work they are about to do. For educational reform to be successful, teachers need leadership and support that take those differences into account. Additionally, teachers like the two who were successful need the freedom to create programs for their students. Without addressing interrelated systems that press upon teachers as they go about their daily work, reform efforts that impose external standards all teachers must follow are likely to fail. Webb and Ashton recommended ecological reforms designed to democratize the workplace. Such reforms would

free the intelligence of those who work in schools, so they might better analyze their problems, invent solutions, and improve the quality of education. Rather than "de-skilling" teachers ... by lessening their autonomy and subjecting them to prepackaged, teacher-proof curriculum materials, the goal of ecological reform is to empower teachers and to increase their sense of efficacy, by helping them take greater control of, and responsibility for, their professional lives. (p. 161)

The successful teachers' analytical approach to teaching and their ability to construct appropriate programs for their students lend support to the need for reforms such as Webb and Ashton recommend. The less successful teachers' reliance on the administration for guidance suggests that some teachers will need substantial help learning how to think reflectively about their teaching if they are to take greater control of their professional lives. Findings from this study also suggest that administrators will need extensive support learning how to work in professional relationships with teachers, especially if they have been socialized into hierarchical systems such as that of the Urbantown School District.

Doing Ethnography in a Public School District: Lessons Learned and Conclusion

The final dissertation became six case studies: one for each of the four teachers, one for the district administrators and principals involved in the study, and one for the school district. This was not the study that I had planned. It began as a descriptive ethnography of what teachers did as they implemented one program designed to educate Southeast Asian refugee students with little English and limited formal schooling. It became a study of the program implementation process and focused on understanding why and how four teachers made instructional decisions as they socially constructed the program in their classrooms. It also became a study of district-level factors that influenced the daily classroom lives of the teachers and their ability to implement the CBEP. By allowing the study to unfold, I learned a great deal about the ways in which the social context of a school district influences decisions teachers make and the instructional programs they

create in their classrooms. I also learned how two very good teachers were able to educate the Southeast Asian refugees in their classes despite the social context in which they taught. Although it was not the kind of instructional model I had thought would emerge from the study, the data from two teachers resulted in a model that documented the complexity of educating refugees with no English skills and limited academic preparation or formal schooling.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. In this case, I discuss how assumptions I had made influenced the initial research design, research questions, and initial data collection. What could I have done before I entered the field to reduce their effects?
 2. When an ethnographer enters a social context, he or she is ascribed a status within the group. How did the issue of status impact initial data collection? Could anything have been done prior to the study to reduce the influence my status had on the teachers' perception of me and my role as an evaluator?
 3. Anthropologists recommend long-term participant observation, usually 1 year or longer, when conducting an ethnography. What are the benefits of long-term on-site participant observation, and what are the drawbacks?
 4. What are some of the drawbacks of being familiar with the social context in which one is conducting an ethnographic study? What are some of the benefits?
 5. One of the challenges of field research is being able to identify when participants are performing a script or acting as they think the ethnographer wants them to act, rather than acting naturally. What are the implications for the validity of an ethnography, and what steps might an ethnographer take to insure an accurate representation of the social context being studied?
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Further Reading

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