

Reflections on Documenting Teaching: Entry, permissions, position, focus and other issues

Over the course of the semester, the students' own reflections give a glimpse of the development of their plans: from general ideas about the kinds of issues they might look at; through a gradual deepening of their abilities to describe and articulate what they were seeing and learning; to the development of website designs and graphics that helped them to crystallize their ideas. Excerpts from the instructor's responses to their reflections also help to reveal some of the common issues and challenges that may arise as students and other attempt to document teaching and development useful representations of it.

The students' reflections also illustrate a host of questions and tensions that are a natural part of this kind of work that straddles the worlds of research and practice, including issues involving entry to schools and classrooms, permissions, focus, the researcher's position and even the use of video in the research and teaching process. Excerpts from their reflections and the response of the instructor to their reflections follow:

Beginning, negotiating entry...

This whole initiating process seems to be taking forever

gaining entry into a site is a major concern. How will we "convince" the gatekeepers that our endeavors are legitimate? Who do we speak to first? How do we conduct our research without interrupting classroom dynamics? Issues of power and authority are also a concern. Will this project be co-authored? How much input should the teacher/researchers give?

I want to have a chance for students who want to ask questions about this work to be able to ask them. I also want to make this accessible to them...I am not working in a place where many students have ever been on a college campus, how can I bring this idea of telling our story into a reality? Why is it significant? If I am going to make this classroom public, what implications does that have for the students in that classroom?

[We] were introduced to the principal, who did not seem too interested in actually meeting us.

it seems that we are taking too much time on defining and not getting to the actual documentation. Is like if we wait until we construct together this theoretical framework to document how it plays out in his class, the semester will be over before we start.

Getting permission

As I think about the students in my class and think about their many needs, I wonder how to incorporate their many perspectives into the ways in which I document this process. What happens if [someone] continues to say, yes I will bring in my

permissions, but never does, does her voice have to be left out and what does that do to the overall documentation of the work?

What am I going to do about the probability that some students will not hand in their permissions? I have called homes on most students, I have called to remind students, I have given students multiple forms, when should I stop?

I need to call homes this week and make a concerted effort to bring this project back into class, I know a number of students just need me to call and remind them, I'm not sure why I am not doing this more diligently, I think perhaps I am having the ethical dilemma of wanting them to be making the decision on their own. It's hard to differentiate as the researcher and teacher when I am using my power as a students' teacher to further my own research and when I am gently reminding them. I wonder how long to push for those forms to come back. I also need to think about whether or not I need to seek someone outside of myself to go in to talk about this project with the students...

We are continuing with the development of the letter and permission form. It should be ready for distribution next week. Most interesting to me through this process is the power of language and inclusion/exclusion of discourse. When creating the letter for the families, I felt that it was very important to feel them included and invited into the research.

Becoming the researcher within the same community [where I am a teacher] includes rethinking my own relationship with the each participant of the community. As the letter and permission form were revised several times, each revision challenged my own clarity in the research purpose and possible implications for each participant.

Many questions emerged for me based on this experience relating to the entire research process. If the children/families are viewed as co-researchers in the research process, how should they be asked to be part of the research? Further, are they co-researchers in the process or are they merely objects of research? How are we (Deborah and I) considering the power structure of the research? Who holds the most power? Can the power dynamics change throughout the process?

Focus

In the attempt to define the focus for the project, I keep coming back to the need to choose a few audiences to have in mind for making decisions. What we want to document, what to look for and where, depends on what we want to be able to show and what kind of engagement we want to make available to each audience.

I think that reading some more material will definitely help me to get a clearer view of where I want to be but I feel sometimes as though I am running around in circles.

We feel like we have good ideas but need to focus. Our ideas haven't completely taken shape yet.

We need to keep investigating in order to focus ourselves.

Another issue that we face is deciding on how this site should be used. This takes the idea of choosing an audience one step further because it also asks if our target audience will even find this site helpful

I am also worried about creating a doable timeline from which to work. I think that I could easily get stuck in the “thinking process” and neglect to get started on the doing process.

We wonder if we should just start videoing around the room and see what develops.

Eventually I am going to have to gain focus and make a decision and I am just worried that I will make a decision about including a topic that people are not interested in or has been done before in the past...

is it too much...too little, would anyone even care about this?

Position

How should I organize to effectively present the website? Should I reflect my position in this study? Or, am I going to become an invisible researcher who conducts the study behind the scene? ... What kind of bias do I have? Do I need to openly share with viewers my background, bias or presumption of this study on the website? How will it affect viewers? Do I really give a choice to viewers so that they can make a decision to utilize the website?

Will this study be beneficial to the students? Are there any disadvantages that students might have from participating in this study? In what ways do students learn from the experience? After this study, how will they react to peer conference? Is there any possibility that videotaping may promote or disturb students' working?

Should I expect the viewers to be engagers with the information or is the website as a container more fruitful for the teacher educator?

Video

having a video camera in the classroom adds a particular component that is an odd dynamic. I'm not quite sure sometimes when to just let it go and not video tape for a while to let both the students' anxieties and my own settle down.

Throughout all the literature that I have read thus far, although there is much about the value of documenting your own practice and being a practitioner researcher, I am not finding as much about the intensity of the reflection you get while video taping (I think the Lampert piece is useful here). Video taping has offered a rather unique view into the life of the classroom. I am more acutely aware of how we are doing things when there is a video tape in the classroom. Thus it gives me an odd perspective as a researcher by allowing me to really understand that the act of research is changing what is happening in the classroom.

we closed the door after [the security guard] came by and I was standing on a chair on the table in order to position the microphone through the lights on the ceiling

I have experienced the comfort of video (an activity that I have done many times before) in a new light. What has been such a familiar task in the past became very strange to me as I moved about trying to capture events and conversations that felt significant.

After viewing the tapes, it's quite possible that we won't use anything from our first day of taping

Excerpts from the instructor's responses to the students reflections

In the end, the website will always probably contain too much information for some people and not enough for others. In general, I think it makes sense to think of the web pages (particularly the home page) as having headlines and perhaps a topic sentence (in terms of text), but you can also have pdf of a full page "handout" or description of the site and the key ideas.

Don't forget that you can only use as much data as you have time to look at!

Think of the website as a series of course assignments. How many course assignments can you complete in the semester?

If push comes to shove are there any of these things you can do without or do in an abbreviated way? (such as the reflections from outside people?) Don't forget that some new tasks will also inevitably arise, so revisiting this timeline and revisiting your goals and purposes will also be crucial as you go.

Depending on how hard it is to videotape, decide how many videos you can reasonably produce and then develop a schedule or a way to "sample" the conferences going on in the class. You might look at conferences once a week, or once a month, or three days one week and three days 2 months later etc. Again, those tapes serve as your archive, but then within them you could just choose to analyze conferences that go really well and those that don't, or something else.

While it's important to document the context, the more you emphasize that this is a unique context, the less relevant you may make it for other people. One issue with representing the context is to help people understand what's relevant from this context for their own classrooms

While I think the involvement of students in the process can be important, I'm not sure I always know what you see as the purpose of involving them (e.g. just because it's the right thing to do, because of the "power" issues at play, because it will help them learn

about college etc., because it will help them reach the learning goals you have for them etc., because it's more practical and efficient...etc.

I also think that because of the demands of your teaching, your documentation and the demands of the class and research have to take a "back seat" to teaching and learning and you will have to be very flexible and adaptive in your documentation. One teacher I worked with described it as feeling like his research was a trailer hitched onto the back of his teaching.

Listening to the different issues that come up in each project just reminds me of the wealth of details, complexities, and challenges in each project. ... With ample time and easy ways to meet and talk, you could probably deal with these. But the limited time to talk and develop common understandings really makes this hard.

I think you can construe this project and your own role and relationship with [the teacher] in a number of different ways. You can imagine that you are doing joint research together, that you are doing two different projects with shared data, that you are doing one project and he's doing another... etc. Taking into account the concerns and perspectives of teachers and others participants does not mean that you have to do what they think you should, but it does mean that you need to take their ideas seriously and interrogate your own assumptions and approach. In other words, you can develop a project that fits your needs and constraints without necessarily steering him away from his passion. So, I think you might be able to help him investigate the questions he's interested in while getting his help in addressing the questions you have. Ideally, these may turn out to be two sides of the same coin, but we'll see.

Think of a way to do something that helps the teacher and helps offset the many things you are already asking him to do.

Although you suggest that you need to "focus" more and need to do more work before videotaping etc., it really feels like you have done a good job laying the groundwork for your documentation. You've reviewed the literature and identified some gaps you can help fill

Because you have access to so much data (and so much may be in written form you can collect), I can also imagine that a lot of what you are going to do will be to create a set of archives that other people could examine. For example, you may not have time to review all of the student work that students' produce. But (if you allow enough time to scan it all in and organize it somehow, and don't underestimate the amount of time that will take) you can simply state some of the questions you'd like to explore, but then leave it to others (or you in the next 5 or 10 years) to do it.

Part of what you may be feeling is the difficulty of breaking down what is a complex holistic experience into discrete pieces that can be isolated and examined. How can you look at a part, when the part is meaningless without the whole? I know it doesn't help much, but one way to deal with this is simply to recognize the problem and choose to

move on and focus on some aspect anyway, knowing it will not be adequate... Specifically, for this project, that may mean moving along parallel tracks: continuing to reflect on and examine your practice and your experience as a “whole”, while picking out a confined aspect of your practice –a class, an assignment, a topic, a student etc. – to document for this project. You may choose not to use any of your “larger” reflections for this project, or you could write or produce a short reflection which clues people in to these larger concerns.

The key question, though, remains what you are collecting the data for?

Some conversations with teacher educators have also reminded me that, for the most part, those in your audiences are not going to be able to do what you’re doing in the classroom. I’d even argue that you might do them a disservice by encouraging them to try to do what you’re doing, when they are unlikely to have the support, skills, or understanding to pull it off. So one question is, are there some ideas or strategies you could help them develop that would serve as building blocks – initial steps – they could use to improve their practice and move it in this direction?

I’m wondering if another challenge you’re facing comes from a desire to make sure that audiences take away some important messages from your work: teaching is complex; open-ended constructivist curricula can work: these students are capable of doing substantial mathematics etc. I can understand that desire, but producing a representation that conveys a message is very different from developing what is essentially a “data set” for the purposes of interpretation. The two purposes are in conflict in some ways at least, particularly when audiences are allowed or encouraged to make their own interpretations and, in fact, may not have enough initial knowledge to make what those who have been involved in the situation consider to be appropriate interpretations....

I worry that I have not been able to help you enough and that I seem to be sending you off in different directions rather than helping you zero in on what you want to do...

I constantly “wonder” about whether or not I am providing too much structure and direction or too little, and I have those same concerns in this class and in my comments to you. Will you learn more if I “let you go” and don’t warn you away from some things? Would my pulling back at this point cause more problems since my comments helped to lead you away from some of your original ideas in the first place?

Part of [the challenge in doing this kind of documentation] may be coming to terms with the conventional notions about what’s scientific and what constitutes good research that we all seem to pick up somewhere along the way.