Ethnographic Research in Teaching and Learning the English Language Arts

Studying the Cultural Contexts of Teaching and Learning the English Language Arts

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In an earlier review, Green and Bloome (1997) drew attention to the different ways in which ethnography has influenced research in education. They made a useful distinction between ethnography as practiced within anthropology and the rather different use of ethnography when adopted and deployed as part of educational research. Classic ethnography has traditionally been predicated on prolonged immersion in the research setting(s). It operates inductively using extensive periods of observation and participation to build a deep understanding of the relevant distinctions and categories that structure social life in ways that are familiar to community members but alien to the researcher. The classic ethnographer starts as an outsider and works their way in. This approach to research has led to the development of a range of procedures and research tools which have become core to the discipline. By contrast, it is more usual for education researchers to borrow more selectively from the tradition often in pursuit of more narrow and specific research purposes. To capture some of these distinctions Green and Bloome draw a contrast between “doing ethnography”—the traditional extended and open-ended engagement with a particular community; “adopting ethnographic perspectives”—a more closely focused study of certain aspects of community practices and social life, predicated on understanding the logic of that activity from participants’ point of view; and “using ethnographic research tools”—adopting particular methods that derive from that tradition, such as participant observation, or open-ended interviews, but deploying them with more limited objectives in mind.

For education researchers, immersion in the research setting for an extended period is relatively rare, increasingly so in recent times. Indeed when contact is sustained with a particular community for a significant length of time it is more likely to have as its goal changing classroom practice in interaction with participants (Bloome, Power, Morton, & Otto, 2005; Hicks, 2002). In which case the researcher may well take an active part in modifying the setting they observe. In the light of Green and Bloome’s distinctions the key questions for this article are: when and under what circumstances have researchers in the language arts turned to ethnography? How has this work fed into an understanding of the cultural contexts in which English language arts teaching and learning takes place? What lessons can be drawn for pedagogy in the English language arts classroom?

The Turn to Ethnography in the English Language Arts

The use of ethnography in the English language arts can be traced back to a moment in time when linguistics and social psychology were increasingly influential in education. In reflecting back on this period of intellectual activity, roughly from the mid-1960s to early 80s, Bernstein described this in terms of a “remarkable convergence” across a range of disciplinary fields on the concept of competence:

He saw this as a historically specific conjunction of ideas and pedagogic practices. An example of this kind of blending across different traditions can be seen in the UK in the writings of educationalists such as James Britton, Douglas Barnes, and Harold Rosen from the late 60s onwards. Their work helped focus English teachers’ attention on the use of children’s own language as a positive resource in the classroom. The spontaneous creativity of children’s speech was counterpoised to the dry formality of much teacher talk (Barnes, 1977). Capturing children’s language at its
most creative often seemed to necessitate stepping outside the confines of the classroom and turning away from its existing prescriptions for the well-crafted sentence or figure of speech. The turn in linguistics towards the study of children’s early language in naturally occurring settings reinforced this sense of children’s innate creative capacity. Often undertaken by the parent as researcher and facilitated by the advent of the portable tape-recorder, analysis of children’s entry into language focused on their intentions, and their grasp for meaning which seemed to drive linguistic development (Halliday, 1975). Children’s developing skills as readers and writers could be mapped onto this communicative imperative with function taking precedence over form. The concept of emergent literacy signals this same shift, allowing teachers to suspend or mitigate normative judgements that might otherwise be passed on children’s texts based on their approximation to the formal features of standard written language.

Indeed, by extension the analysis of linguistic development through the study of naturally occurring speech became a resource for developing new modes of assessment for children’s progression in reading, writing and the language arts more generally (Perera, 1985). Examining the natural course of progression outside school yielded the necessary course of progression inside the language arts classroom which good teaching could then reinforce as well as deliver. This kind of study of children’s use of language, whether written or spoken, places children themselves and their activity at the centre of the classroom with teachers playing a facilitative role (Dyson, 2003). In Bernstein’s terms this creates an invisible pedagogy which reshapes relations between the teacher and the taught even as it reorders the content of the curriculum (Bernstein, 1996).

Under these conditions what happens outside school, retrieved through observation or research, sanctions change in curriculum content. Such changes were intended to enhance children’s sense of agency. In these ways the interests of professionals and academics interlocked. From the perspective of the early 21st century this point of convergence does indeed now seem a long way away. Since the mid-1980s successive waves of government-sponsored reform have exerted much more centralised control over the school curriculum, defining and prescribing more tightly what its content should be, often through a relentless focus on the measurable outcomes any such interventions should deliver. This has created a new dynamic to the work of the school. Such moves have reinstated visible pedagogies that are much less permeable to cultural activity that lies outside the school (Bourne, 2000; Gutiérrez, 2000). The use of ethnography in language arts research has been coloured by these shifts in the larger landscape.

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The switch from invisible to visible pedagogies has set new challenges for ethnographic research in English and the language arts. Ethnographic research is rooted in concepts of culture and community and the specifics of time and place. Researchers have used this to explore the boundaries between literacy and language practices at home and school and bring them into new relationship. This remains a central concern for work in this area. Yet this endeavour has also raised a number of questions for the field. Where should the focus rest, with which communities, which settings, which practices and which texts? These are political as well as logistical questions. They throw into relief different understandings of the purposes of education and its potential reach. They also map onto conflicting views of the ideal as well as actual relationships between education, social structure and agency.

These issues are contested within the field as much through the selection of the object of enquiry as through open debate. Take for example Dombey’s study of the bedtime story (1992). Using recordings of the conversation that occurs as mother and child make their way through a picture book, Dombey argues that the talk that accompanies the reading matters as much as the voicing aloud of the words on the page. Her analysis of one such event shows that mother and child review the action of the story as it unfolds, ask questions about what will happen next and talk about why things are as they are. The analysis focuses on the democratic and creative potential of both spoken and written language. It demonstrates the pedagogic value of talk about text that actively engages children with exploring the narrative logic of the story world. The focus on the playfulness of this encounter and its intimacy acts as a riposte to didactic literacy pedagogies which prioritise decoding and accurate recall at the expense of other important aspects of learning to read. Yet, the data also captures practices which are specific to and much valorised by particular middle class communities. This potentially sets at nought those communities who do not already share this practice.

The title of Heath’s article “What No Bed-time Story Means” (1982) highlights some of the tension points, suggesting as it does that the absence of the bed-time story matters. Heath proposes that in important ways literacy practices in “mainstream” homes dovetail with ideas about literacy learning that are prevalent in school. She argues that by contrast other communities experience no such continuities in practice as they enter school. This disadvantages their children whilst simultaneously privileging those whose practices operate seamlessly either side of the home-school boundary.

“What No Bed-time Story Means” derives from Heath’s extensive and full-scale ethnographic research into the language and literacy practices of two distinct Appalachian communities, Roadville and Trackton, which culminated in the publication of *Ways with Words* (Heath, 1983). This was indeed the result of “doing ethnography” in the classic anthropological tradition. In the book Heath returns to the question of the apparent absence in the White working-class community of Roadville and the Black working-class community of Trackton of particular competencies and
practices closely associated by middle-class communities with literacy learning. She turns this contrast on its head by revealing the presence of other no less important competencies these communities generate round literacy which schools overlook.

This takes the argument over home school boundary relations in another direction, towards the issue of whether and how schools recognise what communities already do. The book makes a strong case for teachers to identify and fully understand different ways of entering into uses of language and literacy, rooted in diverse community practices which children will bring with them into school. This acts as a challenge to normative judgements, which would otherwise create a picture of deficient communities. Once teachers recognise the “funds of knowledge” communities already deploy new connections can be built from home to school practices in ways that open up school learning to all (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

These remain powerful ideas which continue to influence ethnographic research into the English language arts. Yet, they have not fully settled the issues of which kinds of literacy practices, which communities and which texts teachers should pay attention to, nor how they should use that knowledge in the classroom. In the research literature, arguments revolve around the extent to which co-opting out-of-school knowledge inside school acts as a powerful resource; how such knowledge can act as a bridge to other kinds of school-based literacy practices; and whether pedagogies formed across the boundary can act as levers to produce higher achievement or greater social equality? In the United States these arguments have played out most strongly round practices and texts associated with minority communities; in the UK they are as likely to play out around gender, new technologies or social class.

In one sense this is a framing issue: the kinds of research into home practices advocated by Dombey and Heath both have a point and a function, but they bring very different things into relationship through the sampling choices they made. The accounts they generate of particular local practices unsettle schooling in different kinds of ways, and do so with different strategic objectives in mind. Both Ladson-Billings’ (1995) work on culturally relevant pedagogies and Gutiérrez’s (2006) work on pedagogies for empowerment make explicit where they think priorities should lie. Both insist that such approaches will only be enough if they lead to high achievement—and the record here is that best patchy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In making this judgement, they are increasingly looking out to an educational landscape fundamentally shaped by performance scores and the verdict they pass on individuals, on teachers, on schools and on communities.

The Cultural Contexts of Teaching and Learning in the English Language Arts: Looking Towards the Future

In an interesting discussion on the contribution case studies and small-scale ethnographies make to knowledge about literacy, Brandt and Clinton (2002) comment on a significant weakness in the field that derives from its insistence on a focus on the local. They argue that the local is always intersected by larger shapes, and that to ignore this is to rob the analysis of proper depth. We simply end up looking in the wrong place for the wrong kinds of evidence. Championing the local is not enough to bring things right.

Where anyone is observed reading and writing something, it is well worth asking who else is getting something out of it; often that somebody will not be at the scene. Literacy objects can function as the medium through which the energies invested in literate practices in one context are organized into benefits for those in other contexts (just as benefits from other contexts might flow to individuals through the use and form of their literacy). We need perspectives that show the various hybrids, alliances, and multiple agents and agencies that simultaneously occupy acts of reading and writing. Agency is indeed alive and well in reading and writing but it is not a solo performance. (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 347)

In the article they suggest that these more complex connections that link literacy here to literacy there can be traced through the materiality of literacy and its technologies: individual agency is not enough to subsume bigger forces elsewhere.

The Brandt and Clinton (2002) article has provoked considerable discussion amongst ethnographers of literacy (Street, 2003, 2004; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). It has also brought general acknowledgement that there is indeed a limit to research at the local level:

for many people the literacies they engage with come from elsewhere and are not self invented; and there is more going on in a local literacy than “just local practice”. [these] are all important caveats to deter [researchers] from over emphasizing or romanticizing the local. (Street, 2003, p. 2826)

Attention has turned to what dealing with the non-local, cast as the distant/the autonomous, might mean. This has set the scene for a re-run of arguments over structure and agency, and how far local action is constrained by forces
outside itself or still finds room to re-make the social world. Much of the discussion then focuses on the tools available to make the distant appear and whether or how far this is necessary. However, in the context of this piece, I want to take this discussion another way and reflect on the limits of “the local” as a frame by which to count in or count out the object of study (see also Kell, 2006).

To put the local in place in research into English and the language arts, researchers often start either with a particular text or a particular community and then within this frame document the social interactions that instantiate reading or writing as meaningful exchanges in this case. The local is a distinct mode of operating – authentic and purposeful. By challenging the limits of the local, Brandt and Clinton’s (2002) charge seems to rob such moments of their inner integrity. Yet as things stand in terms of the technologies and sites for literacy practices, and the settings in which literacy is learned, it is becoming increasingly hard to get a handle on “authentic” practices in this way (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009). Texts seldom belong fully to one community—hip-hop literacies provide an obvious example. Via the music industry and the Internet such texts have gone out well beyond the community boundaries that might once have generated and contained them. Even within the originating community (however that could be defined, taking into account differences of gender and class), hip-hop literacies do not stand for a single thing (Hill, 2008). Rather they take their place amongst a veritable cacophony of other practices both at the point they originate and as they continue to circulate. This brings them into a continuous process of dispute and challenge. Indeed, how disputes and challenges arise and are resolved may be more important to study and document than who really owns the practice or the space that is required to enact ownership (Moss, 2007).

Texts do not always align with particular communities, whilst particular communities are themselves divided by gender and class (Moss, 2007; Solsken, 1993; Stabile, 2000). How then should ethnographers of English and the language arts frame their enquiry?

I began this chapter by signalling the way in which over the last 20 years centrally-driven processes of education reform have altered relations between teachers and taught, and between schools, communities, and the state (Bernstein, 1996). These changes can be instatiated at the level of classroom practice (Moss, 2004). The attempt to bring practices from home into school have become immensely more difficult; rather a reverse process is underway in which homes as cultural sites are increasingly pedagogized by the state (Ball & Vincent, 2005). The relative success schools are able to demonstrate in terms of pupil performance now plays out in the public arena. If they do not meet the benchmarks set, teachers, schools, pupils, and communities can all variously be blamed. In this sense learning literacy in schools is shaped through the intertwining of the local and the distant, the autonomous and the ideological. Keep the focus too tight on patterns of social interaction in school classrooms or their relationship to home, and we risk missing something else: the economic ruin visited on whole communities through economic re-structuring that has reshaped expectations about what education should do for whom. Ethnographies of literacy learning need to keep these bigger shapes in mind as they navigate and the immediate and the small scale.

References
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