

*Florida Journal of  
Educational Research  
Fall 1992, Vol. 32,  
No. 1, Pp. 60-72.*

**Insiders and Outsiders in Classroom Research:  
Blurring the Boundaries**

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**ABSTRACT.** In this article, the situation of teacher researchers is explored from a sociocultural perspective. Teacher researchers are viewed as an emergent community of educators who position themselves for leadership and change in the traditional, role-based distinctions that divide research and practice. By taking the classroom as the central focal point for researchers and teachers alike, and applying a concept of insiders and outsiders to what happens there, a wide range of actors and issues involved in generating theories and informing practice is made visible. Inquiry, whomever conducts it, is viewed as an active process through which purposes are systematically and intentionally related to issues of setting, time, conditions, actions to be taken, and audience(s). Directions for the future of the teacher research movement are located in a focus on student learning, what we shall choose to count as learning when learning counts, and how we should value the social consequences of learning.

Life at the edge is never easy. Yet, taking the emergence of this special issue of the Florida Journal of Educational Research as evidence, teachers and researchers in Florida are poised at the edge of each other's lifeworlds. By engaging in teacher research, they walk in the borderlands of a great divide that has traditionally separated the world of the classroom from the world of research. As a newfound community, they are seeking visibility and ground in ways that will effectively blur the boundaries between classroom practice and research on classroom practice. As teachers, they engage in classroom practice. As researchers, they stand at a periphery to develop general theories of classroom practice. And they do both, because both are relevant to building understandings

of teaching/learning processes, what it means to be a teacher, and what it means to be a researcher.

Teacher researchers are admittedly few in number. It is rare to find teachers engaged in research. It is also rare to find researchers able to collaborate and support the interests of teacher researchers. Most importantly, although the teacher research movement has steadily gained ground over the last decade in some parts of the country (Bissex & Bullock, 1987; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Goswami & Stillman, 1987; Ross, 1987), it is exceptionally rare to find teacher research being used as part of the professional knowledge base intended to inform classroom practice. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle point out, of the 35 reviews of research contained in the Handbook of Research on Teaching (Wittrock, 1986), none are written by teachers. More telling, perhaps, is the fact that all of these reviewers have failed to cite any publications of research authored by teachers. Rather, the role of teacher inscribed in the pages of the Handbook is as research subject, as "data point", and ultimately, as consumer and implementor of the findings of other researchers.

Thus, teacher researchers are a marginal lot. When members of either community engage in the activities of classroom-based research, they separate themselves from the dominant mainstream of their respective professional groups. They are risk takers who position themselves for leadership and for change, not only in the ways we think about research, but also in the ways we construe the professional lifespace and repertoires of teaching. Rather than viewing teaching as the prescribed implementation of the received wisdom of others, they push toward a conceptualization of teaching itself as an inquiry process. Members of both communities challenge long-held beliefs, both in Florida and elsewhere, about the authority over their practices that "RESEARCH" commands, who might engage in research, and indeed, who might articulate the voice that constitutes "Research says . . ."

### **Teacher Research**

But by engaging in teacher research, these teachers and researchers also gain a vantage point for peering into the complex webs of meaning and significance that typically define each other's realities. They encounter firsthand the challenges and complexities, rights and obligations, and supports and constraints of alternative roles and differing reward structures. Nonetheless, just as we note the differences, it is also important to identify the similarities. Our search should be aimed at locating the common ground--the similarities in assumptions, predispositions, values, and interests that can effectively blur the boundaries between disparate

worlds and support the emergence of visible and viable communities for teacher research.

One way of blurring the boundaries that separate research and practice is to consider a concept of teachers as insiders and researchers as outsiders to the world of the classroom (see Note 1). By examining what is meant by these terms and who might assume the roles of insider and outsider, it is possible to establish a framework for understanding the relationships among actor, purpose, approach, audience, and use of classroom research. The purpose here is to explore the full range of actors involved in classroom research and to seek ways of conceptualizing the needs and contributions of these different actors. The framework also provides a way to identify issues that need to be considered if we, as educators, are to develop general theories of practice as well as ways to inform our own practices and theories about practice.

The argument presented in this article is developed in three parts. In the first, a theoretical grounding is provided to clarify the concept of insiders and outsiders engaged in classroom-based research. A second section provides the framework for conceptualizing the relationships of actor to role and purpose. This framework lays a foundation for building a dialogue among the various actors concerned with classroom research, which is clearly needed if we are to develop theories of practice and ways of informing practice that go beyond current models and understandings. In the final section, an interest in redefining student learning is suggested as the common ground and focal point for uniting various actors concerned with bringing about improvements in the processes of schooling. Questions about what we should count as learning are identified as a transcendent value that connects all in a continuing search for ways of enhancing understandings of teaching/learning processes.

### **Insiders and Outsiders: Some Theoretical Considerations**

The concept of insiders and outsiders is based in anthropological studies of culture that distinguish between two contrasting perspectives: emic and etic. Put quite simply, emic is derived from the term phonemic to signify sounds in a language that are meaningful to members within a social group. Etic, in contrast, which is taken from phonetic, signifies sounds in a language that have meaning to an outside observer (Grice, 1975). Viewed in this way, not all sounds that are conceivable within a larger universe of sounds and actions are meaningful to members of the group. Thus, emic refers to ways in which members of a social group (for instance, a classroom) interpret, understand, and use particular ideas, actions, and objects. Etic refers to the description of the language, actions, and objects that is constructed by individuals who are not members of the social group,

or by someone who attempts to stand back from the group to observe and record what is occurring. The goal of a person who engages in etic description (e.g., a researcher who engages in ethnography or a teacher researcher who engages in teaching as an inquiry process) is to obtain an understanding of what it means to be a member of the social group and what is required to participate in socially and culturally appropriate ways in the life of the group. Not all researchers who engage in etic description, however, seek to understand the emic perspective. Most classroom research can be defined as consisting of external descriptions of classroom life. This research, often grounded in positivist/post-positivist, process-product, and realist views of the world (Phillips, 1983), seeks to describe classroom life using predefined categories that reflect the outsider's view of practice. Typically, the purposes of the outsider have been associated with attempts to judge the observed actions as effective or appropriate. What this approach to research typically fails to consider are the meanings and functions of the observed actions, language, and objects (for instance, the material artifacts of curriculum) within the group being observed. Discussions of the value of emic and etic distinctions for understanding alternative research approaches are presented in reasoned arguments available elsewhere (see Erickson, 1986; Sands & McClelland, 1989).

The purpose of highlighting distinctions between emic and etic is to suggest that a gap exists between outsiders' descriptions of the actions, language, and options available to members of a classroom and, in contrast, the meanings members of a classroom hold for the observed actions, messages, and curricular artifacts. This gap between the emic and the etic is an important distinction because it provides one possible explanation for the perceived gap between research and practice. If the goal of research is to aggregate across classrooms to identify generalizable patterns without consideration of individual differences among classrooms, then etic descriptions will be developed that do not reflect the experiences of individual teachers and students in individual classrooms. Thus, etic descriptions may not capture the lived experiences of those most closely involved in the day-to-day activities of life in classrooms. This research may be valuable at a level of theory development, traditionally the purview of university-based researchers, but it can easily fail to connect at a local level. The perceived gap may be a real gap, and the research will be viewed by those most closely involved with classroom practice as less than helpful.

### **The Classroom Culture**

Central to the discussion of etic and emic perspectives is the concept of a social group as a culture. Drawing from work in cognitive anthropology, a group that affiliates over time can be defined as a culture by virtue of the fact that norms

and expectations for acting and interacting are developed and, over time, become established. That is, members of a classroom culture have patterned ways for interpreting what is occurring, interacting with each other, acting on the objects, artifacts, and other "things" that come into their world, evaluating what they observe, and developing beliefs about what is appropriate and what is possible (Goodenough, 1971; Spradley, 1980). By viewing the classroom as a culture, there are ways to explore classrooms as subcultures of schools, and various groups within classrooms and schools can be observed as their respective subcultures. In addition, questions can be raised about the multiple groups to which any given individual may belong, the roles the individual plays in these groups, and any role conflicts that may emerge as a consequence of holding membership in multiple groups (e.g., teacher, researcher, supervisor, curriculum specialist, etc.). For example, by asking to what groups a teacher belongs, we can identify groups within and outside the immediate surrounds of the classroom (e.g., family, community, grade-level group, professional organization, etc.).

From this perspective, then, each group will have its own language, norms, and expectations for participating in the culture of the group. Roles and relationships among group members become developed, and the rights and obligations for inclusion in the culture are continually being negotiated (Weade, 1990). If we now apply the concept of insiders and outsiders, we begin to understand the complex nature of teacher research as well as the differential and pluralistic roles of teacher researchers and others concerned with research on classroom practice.

As a member and principal actor in a social group, a teacher holds insider knowledge about life in the classroom. While this knowledge is beneficial, it can also be problematic. The problem stems from the fact that life in a social group becomes patterned and routinized. It can take on a static character that is endemic to life in institutional settings (and schools are institutions; see Note 2). When this occurs, much of what is happening becomes invisible, even to the principle actor in the group. The task, then, for the teacher who takes on a research role is to make the familiar strange (Agar, 1980)--to stand apart from the group for a time in order to systematically observe its ordinary patterns. Distance is needed to make what is ordinarily invisible (e.g., what the teacher cannot see while engaged in teaching) visible. Thus, the teacher as researcher seeks an etic perspective in order to enlarge the ordinary vision.

The task of classroom researcher, taken from an etic point of view, is no less problematic. The researcher, as outsider, enters as a stranger seeking to understand what members of the group already take as ordinary. Thus, the researcher, whether teacher as researcher or university-based researcher of classroom practices,

is an outsider looking for ways to see life just as a member of the group sees it. Doing so is essential if classroom practices are to be understood within and across the key events of the life of the social group in the classroom (Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group [SBCG], in press; Gumperz, 1986). In addition, the outsider must seek ways to enter and access the group without disrupting the ordinary ebb and flow of life in the group.

### **Toward a Framework: Constructing Roles in Relation to Purposes**

What becomes clear in the above discussion is that the tasks of engaging in research are neither automatically given nor predetermined according to a role definition. Rather, research is an enterprise conceivably undertaken by a wide range of actors who move intermittently and perhaps interchangeably across the boundaries that define the inside and outside spheres of the classroom. That is, those who might engage in research include students, parents, administrators, policymakers, and members of community organizations, as well as teachers, university researchers, staff development specialists, and teacher educators. Individuals who represent these groups comprise a range of constituent actors concerned with classroom practice and with developing general theories of practice.

Figure 1 provides a framework in which the roles of various actors can be systematically related to a context of purpose for defining a research project. As indicated on the horizontal axis, a context of purpose is also tied to issues of place, time, conditions, and actions to be taken, as well as the audience(s) for whom reports of the research will be prepared. In conceptualizing this framework, the qualified versions of researcher (e.g., teacher researcher, university researcher, classroom researcher) have been abandoned in favor of "research" as a general heading. The qualification is a political one that serves to maximize the range of actors who might legitimately assume the rights and obligations of conducting research and collaborating in a research project (see Note 3). Moreover, while any of the constituent actors interested in classroom practice might engage in research, none have the right to prefer one form of research over any other.

Rather, it can be argued that the purpose of the research and the audience to which it is directed must be considered when judging the quality and usefulness of the research. By using the framework, it is possible to articulate how the role of the actor influences what is being done, by whom, in what ways, under what conditions, when, where, for what purposes, and with what intended outcomes. These premises are drawn from work in cognitive anthropology and are based on a view of human activity as purposeful and situated within a social group.

Figure 1.  
*Framework for relating actor(s) to contexts of purpose.*

Actor	Purpose of Research	Place	Time	Conditions	Actions to be Take	Intended Audience(s)
Teacher						
Students						
University researchers						
Teacher educators						
Parents						
Administrators						
Policymakers						
Members of community organizations						
Other						

Reports of research, like those contained in this special issue of the Florida Journal of Educational Research as well as other publications, can be construed as stories about life in classrooms. Their authors, the researchers, chose a language and a way of describing phenomena that reveal what they have observed. Through the telling, they also make visible the relationships among various actors, purposes, goals, timing, approaches, and actions taken. What is held constant across differing roles is that each actor is located within a context of purpose relevant to the study and that these purposes are located within a community of actors.

In addition, however, when researchers take on roles as authors, they are also obligated to tell the story of their research in ways that will communicate meaning to an intended audience. Audiences, not unlike the constituent actors

involved in the research, belong to communities that have developed norms, expectations, and patterned ways of understanding research conducted in classrooms. Thus, in order to communicate with a particular audience, the "storyteller" must choose a language for presenting information in ways that will both honor and extend the norms and expectations of the audience community. When multiple audiences are intended, the researchers'/authors' task is to make adjustments in language chosen without compromising the fundamental integrity of the originating purpose of the research. The differences in language needed across communities poses a recurring problem for researchers. It also poses a problem for audience members who wish to access the knowledge that research provides. Judgments about what makes sense and what is reasonable are not so much a matter of clear exposition, either in telling or writing. Rather, the complexity is located in the need to communicate clearly for a particular social group (an audience) at a particular point in time. Thus, both researchers and their audiences are accountable for constructing jointly held interpretations of the meaning and significance of what the research reveals.

The framework presented above is an attempt to show that, in addition to teachers and researchers, a range of actors are implicated in studies of classroom practices and concerned with developing general theories of practice. Insiders and outsiders alike seek etic descriptions, emic descriptions, or both of what occurs in classrooms. What needs to be acknowledged are the rights and obligations of collaborating to engage in research as well as the cross-cultural tensions that inevitably inhere, perhaps most pointedly, to those who engage in teacher research. The tensions, however, are potentially productive ones in that they need not be exclusionary. The challenge is to find ways of acknowledging membership in different communities and building pluralistic understandings across communities in order to advance knowledge about classroom practice and to construct general theories of practice.

### **Seeking Common Ground--To Locate Learning**

The framework just presented is like a map. It begins to chart the terrain in which teachers and researchers define themselves as insiders and outsiders in relation to classrooms. The roles they play and the positions they choose, however, are also situated within a wider range of constituent actors and individuals concerned with processes of schooling. Our purpose in drawing the map has been to explore what is required and what is consequential in teacher researchers' attempts to live and work in communities that are inclusive, not divided. By reading the map, we can examine what is made visible through a view of classrooms as dynamically evolving cultures whose members:



- Take on the socially sanctioned roles of teacher and students
- Continually negotiate and define these roles as they affiliate over time with each other and with available materials
- Construct the events and activities that support and constrain what students have an opportunity to learn
- Engage in intentional action and interaction to reach instructional and curricular goals

Considering their complexity, these roles and goals need to be considered social accomplishments in their own right (SBCG, 1992). Moreover, what becomes evident in the map is that processes of teaching and learning cannot be understood in isolation from the other communities and systems of action (e.g., schools, communities, families, professional organizations, peer groups, etc.) in which they are embedded.

Teacher researchers have been described as an emergent community of educators who walk in the borderlands that separate insiders and outsiders in research on classroom processes. Collectively, these educators are redesigning their professional roles by taking on a view of teaching itself as an inquiry process. Thus, they move in concert with, rather than opposition to, changing views and directions in research and what it means to be a researcher (Winter, 1987). They do not have precise models to recommend. Rather, they lead us in a search for the establishment of common ground and conditions that will support continuing inquiry. What we lack at the present time is a language to talk and think about what we do in classrooms, and why. Thus, approaches are needed to assist in building dialogues that are open, ethical, compelling, and professionally credible, in order to facilitate greater convergence and reciprocity between theory and practice.

### Conclusion

In reading the map that the socio-cultural framework provides, it is also necessary to consider what territories remain uncharted. If the promises of the teacher research movement are to be realized--that is, if our inquiries are to prove helpful for informing our own practices and for developing general theories about practice that will take us beyond current models and understandings--then future directions need to be charted. At the least, a set of "markers" can be identified as points of focus for defining common ground. Each of these points, briefly sketched below in the form of questions to guide further inquiry, marks a potentially deep

but relatively untapped reservoir out of which more particular questions and approaches can be crafted in a language that is appropriate to meet local interests and audiences for teacher research.

Selection of focal points in what follows is based on the joint premises that (1) the inquiries of insiders and outsiders alike must begin with the classroom (see Evertson & Murphy, 1992, for a comprehensive examination of implications for the redesign of schooling), (2) classrooms are socio-cultural contexts that both support and constrain opportunities for learning (see Note 4), and (3) questions worth pursuing might be framed in a language that is both timely (e.g., consonant with contemporary interests in the professionalization of teaching and curriculum development) and timeless (e.g., reflecting the practical, perennial issues and problems of teaching and learning that, like classrooms, will endure). Our questions include:

- What beliefs (theories) are guiding our actions and interactions in classrooms?
- What does learning look like? What does highly accomplished learning look like?
- What should count as learning when learning counts?
- What is the social value and consequence of what is being learned?

A final question is drawn from an observational study of learning in an elementary math/science program (Weade, 1992). After systematically documenting their planning processes over the course of a year, the teachers posed a question to summarize the approach they had taken. Their question captures a sense of the uncertainty that is inevitable in taking on a view of teaching as an inquiry process.

- Do we trust our students and ourselves to learn together about subjects and concepts where our prior knowledge is limited?

The issues of trust and of learning together with students by actively pursuing unknown territories and untested assumptions are keys. For teacher researchers who can blur the boundaries between research and practice, they unlock a direction to the future.

## Notes

1. Conversely, traditional role distinctions locate teachers as peripheral outsiders to a world of research. By default, experienced, exemplary teachers may not be consonant with changing dynamics in the research community and the new-found legitimacy of alternative approaches to doing research. A recent study conducted in an elementary math/science program illustrates the case in point. As part of procedures for gaining entry and access, confusion emerged. Terminology presented by the researcher (e.g., "participant observation", "language of teaching", and "discourse analysis") held little meaning. Teachers wondered how research could be conducted without any surveys, questionnaires, experimental conditions and treatments, and no interest in cumulative folders. At the beginning, their agreement to participate was based more on curiosity than understanding (see Weade, 1992, 1990 for further clarification).
2. Life in a social group can also become patterned and routinized for university-based researchers. Universities, not unlike schools, are institutions in which professional cultures can become static. One way to prevent professional stagnation, both school-based and university-based educators/researchers, is to create conditions that facilitate "walking in both worlds."
3. There is no intent in this article to fill in the face of the matrix. Rather, the intent is to invite readers to consider what roles might be assumed by others involved in their studies. Consideration of each actor involves multiple consideration, such as their audience(s), why they might engage in research, what use the research will be to them, and what might be appropriate research approaches for each group. As each actor is considered, opportunities for building a dialogue across groups might be investigated. Outcomes of research initiatives might be construed to include construction of a multiple-perspective dialogue that can support learning from each other and developing theories of practice that can be used to inform our own practices.
4. Weinstein (1991) provides a comprehensive review of research on the classroom as a social context for learning. For examples of ethnographic approaches for locating learning across the curriculum, see Emihovich (1989), and for locating learning in the times and spaces of teaching, see Weade (1992).

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