

**Problematising researcher-respondent relations
through exploration of communicative stance**

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Abstract

To what extent and in what ways should researchers share their views with research participants during ethnographic fieldwork? This article discusses the author's experience adopting different communicative stances with respondents in the context of an ethnographic study of the enactment of the English National Literacy Strategy in a "failing" primary school. A commonly accepted communicative stance in ethnography, according to which the researcher avoids disclosure of his or her own views, is problematised; and the potential advantages and disadvantages of feedback as a research tool are explored.

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Ethnography involves movement between the familiar and the strange, between the researcher's perspective and the perspectives of members of the culture being studied (Todorov, 1988). To what extent should ethnographers foreground these differences between perspectives in their conversations with research participants? And, if so, how? This article addresses this methodological issue in the context of reflections on my experience conducting ethnographic fieldwork in one English primary school.

I want to begin with comments made by one of the teachers in a discussion of my research with the staff in that school about nine months into my fieldwork. The participants had just examined a transcript of classroom discourse, and one of them expressed concern about “the sort of praise that [the teacher] was peppering in”. She felt that abundant feedback to the children was counter-productive. Another teacher, let us call her Diane Quail,¹ disagreed with her. Her sentiments capture well the issue I would like to explore in this article:

D. Quail: No, it is, because that's normal. In normal conversation, if you're talking to someone – you're not teaching me, we're just having a chat – if you just sat there and never said anything or made a face or nodded or anything, *it wouldn't be a very good conversation*. And I would be thinking, “Oh, God, not going to talk to him again.” But – you know [Others laugh.] Well, that's true, isn't it? If you meet people who don't give you anything back in conversation, you don't want to talk to them, so you don't choose to pick them out at a party. You go (and hide) because you think, “Oh, my God, I can't talk to him again.” Because he doesn't even – you know – all you're doing is doing all the initiating, *you've got to have something coming back*. And it's

¹ A pseudonym, as are all other names in the article.

the same whether you're teaching or having a conversation, if there's nothing coming back, you're not going to encourage and stimulate the conversation...²

Ms. Quail's comments resonate with my own uneasiness about the way I

communicated with teachers in the school over the course of the preceding year.

Although it may not have been her intention, I hear her statements about what makes for "a very good conversation" as indictment of my communication with her and other teachers in that school. In this article I recount my experiences, and use them to reflect on the problem of communicative stance in school-based ethnography.

Specifically, I discuss—

- To what extent and in what ways should researchers share their views with research participants during ethnographic fieldwork?
- How do the unique characteristics of schooling in England impinge upon the communicative strategies and stances available to ethnographers?
- What are the potential advantages and dangers of feedback conversations in school-based ethnography?

The article is organised as follows: first, I introduce the notion of communicative stance and discuss different ways it has been addressed in ethnographic traditions.

Second, I describe my experiences conducting a school-based ethnography, and the largely non-reciprocal communicative stance I adopted. Third, I discuss the shortcomings of this approach, in light of the particular aims and context of my study.

Fourth, I describe my attempts to adopt a more reciprocal stance, and concomitant advantages and dangers.

² On transcription: in order for the reading experience to better approximate the smoothness and fluency of listening, I have added punctuation and not recorded pauses or faltering speech. Transcription uncertainty is marked by parentheses; (xxxxx) indicates inaudible words. Descriptions of intonation and non-verbal activity are provided in brackets. Underlined words are emphasised by the speaker; *italics* is my emphasis.

Communicative stance in ethnography

Ethnographic research involves communication between researcher and research participants in a myriad of situations, including for example daily exchanges of pleasantries, access negotiations, participation in lessons, small talk in the staff room, and of course formal and informal interviews. In engaging in these events, what communicative stance should ethnographers adopt? How actively and in what ways should they contribute? And in particular, how forthcoming should they be in sharing their views with research participants? One approach to this issue is to adopt what I term a *non-reciprocal communicative stance*, in which the researcher attempts to minimise disclosure of his or her own opinions and perspective, at least with regard to the topic of research. The alternative, *reciprocal communicative stance*, involves engaging in a more open exchange of ideas with the research participants, voicing one's perspective in the reciprocal to and fro of conversation.

There are, of course, many different ways of avoiding disclosure or sharing ideas, and researchers change their footing as they shift between different topics and social situations. For example, a researcher may adopt a non-reciprocal communicative stance by maintaining silence, feigning ignorance or assuming the position of interviewer – posing questions in order to avoid answering. A reciprocal communicative stance might involve voicing disagreements, sharing ideas with participants about how to cope with the problems facing them, or feeding back research findings. Note that, while there are many ways of reciprocating in ethnographic fieldwork, the focus of this article is on reciprocity in communication, specifically on the extent to which the researcher “gives something back” in conversations with research participants.

This issue of communicative stance is rarely discussed explicitly in the methodological literature, though ethnographers' positions can be inferred from their descriptions of interactions with informants. Evans-Pritchard (1937), for example, appears to have adopted a reciprocal communicative stance in his research of the Azande, contesting his informants' beliefs with contradictory evidence and interpretations. Note for instance how he responds to a boy who blamed a foot injury on witchcraft:

I always argued with Azande and criticized their statements, and I did so on this occasion. I told the boy that he had knocked his foot against the stump of wood because he had been careless, and that witchcraft had not placed it in the path, for it had grown there naturally. He agreed that witchcraft had nothing to do with the stump of wood being in his path but added that he had kept his eyes open for stumps, as indeed every Zande does most carefully, and that if he had not been bewitched he would have seen the stump. As a conclusive argument for his view he remarked that all cuts do not take days to heal but, on the contrary, close quickly, for that is the nature of cuts. Why, then, had his sore festered and remained open if there were no witchcraft behind it? (pp. 65-66)

Such arguments were not incidental to Evans-Pritchard's project, but were a critical part of his attempt to bring Western science and Azande belief systems into dialogue with one another.

In contrast, non-reciprocal stances seem to be more prevalent in the sociological tradition of ethnography. Spradley (1979) makes this stance explicit in his contrast of the ethnographic interview with "friendly conversation":

Conversation between friends is usually reciprocal: each person asks and answers questions. Conversation between ethnographer and informant is much less balanced; the ethnographer asks the questions and the informant talks about activities and events that make up his lifestyle... (p. 28)

Though not explicitly elaborated in these terms, such a non-reciprocal communicative stance is implicit in much of the ethnography of education literature. For example, Delamont's (2002) discussion of fieldwork relationships, researcher roles and self-disclosure includes a series of cautionary tales about how researchers

carefully managed their self-presentation and avoided conflict in order not to jeopardise rapport or access. Similarly, Walford (1987) notes that his interviews with public school Housemasters, in which the gin and tonic flowed liberally, were a strain because he “had to ensure that [he] did not say too much about [his] own views, which could frequently be in opposition to those of the person [he] was interviewing” (p. 56).

Numerous justifications may be advanced in support of a non-reciprocal communicative stance. First, as noted above, the researcher’s views often conflict with those of the research participants, and as such may be cause for offence or otherwise harm rapport. Moreover, researchers may wish to avoid voicing opinions that could be interpreted as aligning them with one or another side in the various disputes, conflicts and alliances that divide research participants. Third, just as researchers adapt their comments to what they think their informants will or will not want to hear, so informants may also be affected by their perception of the researcher’s positions. Thus, it can be argued, by hiding his or her views, the researcher minimises their potentially distorting effects on participants’ expression. Fourth, ethnography privileges “local knowledge” – the insiders are the experts and thus the “natural” stance for the outsider researcher is one of ignorance.

All four of these justifications relate primarily to epistemological concerns, i.e. ensuring access to and quality of data collected. When a non-reciprocal stance (as part of a broadly objectivist or positivist approach to ethnography) has been criticised, it has been primarily on ethical grounds. Researchers are anxious about the duplicity often involved in evading disclosure of their views, about fulfilling their responsibilities to help research participants, and about issues of advocacy, power and voice in their representation of research participants (for example, Cameron et al.,

1992; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Lassiter, 2001). In the following account of my research experiences I touch upon these ethical issues. However, the thrust of this article is not ethical but epistemological: I argue that in certain situations a reciprocal communicative stance has the potential to improve research knowledge.

An ethnography of policy enactment in a “failing” school

During the 2003-2004 academic year I conducted an extended case study of the enactment of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in Low Tide Primary School (LTPS). The study included participant observation in the school (focusing on literacy in four Key Stage 2 classrooms), formal and informal interviews, audio-recording of lessons, and – in the final months – individual and group feedback conversations. The research site was a large community primary school serving a village which has for all intents become a suburb of a Southern English city. The majority of the pupils came from working class backgrounds, and the ethnic background of over three quarters of them was White British. The local authority considered the school to be “failing”, and indeed it was judged to have “serious weaknesses” on its January 2004 Ofsted inspection.³

Consistent with Troman (1996), I was surprised how difficult I found gaining research access to English primary schools was, and after seven months of being rebuffed by my local authority and other contacts, I settled upon LTPS as the only available option. I arrived at the school through its newly appointed Headteacher, Kathy Boyle, to whom I was introduced by a mutual friend. I had originally

³ Ofsted (the Office of Standards in Education) is the quasi-governmental agency responsible for school inspections in England and Wales. At the time of the research, a team of inspectors would typically visit a school for 3-4 days, observing lessons, perusing data, and interviewing teachers and pupils. Ofsted inspections involve high stakes: reports are publicly available, and failing schools can be shut down and reopened with new management. English teachers treat these inspections with much trepidation (see e.g. Jeffrey & Woods, 1998).

contacted her for advice about negotiating research access, but by the end of the conversation she invited me to conduct my research at LTPS.

Why was Mrs. Boyle enthusiastic where others had been so standoffish? She explained that she hoped my presence would shake her staff out of their complacency, would be a catalyst for them to become more reflective about their practice. (Not necessarily a comfortable position for me.) Mrs. Boyle introduced me at a staff meeting and in-service training event in August and gave me a few minutes to explain my research. At this meeting I also got my first taste of the tense teacher-management relations in the school as “discussions” between Mrs. Boyle and her largely uncooperative staff took the form of a series of Headteacher directives – for example, about how to hang displays, early morning tasks, assemblies, submitting Maths plans, marking, and targets.

It turns out that the new Headteacher was rather unpopular on account of a number of controversial changes she initiated and also on account of the considerable pressure she exerted on teachers to raise pupil attainment. My entrance into the school was likely interpreted as part of that pressure. Perhaps in order to counter that impression, the Head told her staff after my presentation, “I just want you to know that I’d never met Adam before this, it isn’t a fix or anything”. While I found these conditions far from ideal, I had no other options, and the acting Deputy Head and only male teacher at the school, Kevin Thompson, had been very friendly and open. So there was some space for optimism.

In the first instance I visited different Key Stage 2 teachers’ literacy lessons in order to get to know the teachers and pupils and decide on focal teachers and classrooms for the study. Most pretended to be indifferent, Miss Millpond was welcoming and open, Miss Becker was flustered, and Mrs. Thompson – Kevin’s wife

– was openly resistant. When I told her that I was scheduled to be in her class she began yelling at Mr. Thompson that he had said it would be later. I did not catch the entire exchange, but her repeated exclamation, “I just hate it,” was unmistakable. Mr. Thompson insisted that I enter the classroom – essentially against his wife’s will – because the teachers “need to get used to it; we’re going to be Ofsted soon.” (Again not an ideal role for me: Simulator of Ofsted inspections.)

After observing most of the teachers at least once I proposed to Mr. Thompson a schedule that included observing him, Miss Millpond, Miss Becker and Miss Goodwin. My considerations were partly motivated by scheduling exigencies, and also by my desire to get a good mix of teaching styles and experience. I spoke to each teacher individually and asked for permission. All readily agreed except for Miss Becker. She was clearly nervous about the idea, but also reluctant to be the only one that said, “no”. We agreed that we would give it a try and see how it goes; I assured her that it was perfectly all right to withdraw at any time. Later Mr. Thompson told me that she was unnerved by my constant note-taking: she kept wondering what I was writing about. The next day I apologised that I had forgotten to tell her that my notes about her lessons were always open to her, and offered her an opportunity to look over my notes from the previous lesson. She thanked me, but averted her gaze from the open notebook. (Note that consent is problematic in this context. I doubt that any of the teachers felt completely free to decline participation. In particular, teachers lacking job security were likely reluctant to aggravate relations with their new and demanding Head.)

I also participated as observer in staff meetings, training sessions and planning meetings, and volunteered to teach one day a week, in order to contribute to the school, and to gain some legitimacy as a fellow teacher in the eyes of the staff. Mr.

Thompson gratefully accepted this offer, and selected a group of Year 6 “advanced writers” with whom he wanted me to work, to try to “extend them to level 5” on the SATs.⁴ This experience was helpful for me in terms of my own learning, though as an attempt to be seen by teachers as “one of them” it backfired in at least one case. A Year 6 teacher said to Mr. Thompson (in my presence), “What should I tell the pupils – that your [regular] teacher isn’t good enough to get you to level five, so we brought in an expert?”

Teacher reactions to my presence in the classroom varied. Miss Millpond acted as if she was responsible for me and my research, offering me materials and checking to see if I needed anything else before moving on to her next task. Miss Goodwin occasionally joked with me about a “daft” pupil, or complained about another whom she found particularly annoying. Neither actively sought my opinion about what was going on. Mr. Thompson and Miss Becker, on the other hand, occasionally expressed self-criticism that either implicitly or explicitly invited feedback – for example, “that was rather manic,” or “that was a bit overplanned, wasn’t it?”

Most of the teachers appeared to view me as a kind of Inspector. The following exchange from my fieldnotes is indicative:

I spoke with Elisabeth [a Foundation Stage teacher, whom I did not observe], who asked me how the research is going: “Have you discovered what you wanted?”

I laughed, and told her that the questions keep changing, but that it’s all very interesting.

She asked me if I secretly think about all the bad things that are happening, note everything that’s going wrong, the mistakes teachers are making.

I told her that, as a teacher, I’m constantly thinking about what I would do differently – for better or worse – but that that’s entirely irrelevant to my research. [17.11.2003]

Note how Elisabeth not only assumes that I am judgmental, but also that my verdict is damning: “bad things... going wrong... mistakes...” Her conspiratorial reference to

⁴ The SATs are national standardised examinations.

secrecy seems to suggest that I record in my notebooks truths too horrible to be shared. Apropos secrecy, my response was not entirely sincere: many of the issues that I pursued in my analysis emerged precisely from the gaps between what I was observing at the school and my own ideas about literacy education and understanding of the NLS (Agar, 1996, terms such gaps “rich points”).

Within a few weeks my presence at the school was generally accepted, and my observations became routine. I was in the lessons, recording, and had access to relevant documents. I even persuaded (or cajoled, in Miss Becker’s case) the teachers to let me observe and record during the Ofsted inspection. However, I had a nagging sense that, despite these achievements, I was still an unwanted outsider, and was not learning as much as I would have expected. In particular, since my research questions dealt with how teachers interpreted and responded to the NLS, observations of their teaching were insufficient – I also needed access to their thinking. Yet, when I questioned them about their motivations and understandings, they were largely evasive.

One possible explanation for this dynamic was that I was no less coy about my thinking than they were about theirs. As I noted above, Mr. Thompson and Miss Becker occasionally remarked about their lessons in a way that suggested that they would like to hear what I thought (and Mr. Thompson sometimes also asked for advice directly, for example, about how to increase pupil involvement). I tried to abide by these requests in form if not in substance. I would say something positive and reassuring about an aspect of the lesson I thought was good, and also, if appropriate, offer suggestions. With Miss Becker I learned to be careful, because she tended to be sensitive to criticism and often became defensive. Here is a typical exchange with her as recorded in my fieldnotes:

Afterwards, in the staff room, Miss Becker said, "that was a bit over planned, wasn't it?"

I: "What do you mean?"

She: "It was too much to cover."

I: "I didn't notice, because I don't know what you planned but didn't manage." Sensed that she wanted feedback, so we talked briefly about how difficult it is to teach commas. (I didn't say: I think it's too hard for them to inductively discover how to use commas.) I empathized, said that I don't know how I would explain their use. Miss Becker asked if she did it all right. I recapped her explanation -- an additional thought separated by commas -- and said I thought it was clear. [10.11.2003]

This is a good example of a bad conversation. I was trying to be reassuring and empathetic, but I was not completely honest or at all helpful. I even noted to myself what I would have said had I provided her with constructive feedback.

Problems with a non-reciprocal communicative stance in this context

I was uneasy with my evasiveness, and dissatisfied with the quality of information I was receiving from the teachers. As I noted above, part of the problem may have been my adoption of a predominately non-reciprocal communicative stance. In exploring why this might have been the case, I point to general problems with a non-reciprocal communicative stance in school-based ethnography, and to specific factors complicating matters in the case of my research at LTPS.

It is important to view my communication with the teachers within the broader perspective of the structure of teachers' work. Teachers teach "behind closed doors", beyond other adults' scrutiny. The complexity and long-term nature of their task is such that, as a teacher, you can never be completely confident that you are doing a good job (see Jackson, 1986; Labaree, 2000). And, because everybody else's teaching is similarly hidden from view, you have no point of reference from which to measure your own performance. Except for the dreaded – yet infrequent, fleeting and unrepresentative – inspection, one can go through an entire career without ever

receiving feedback on the quality of one's work. I suspect that most teachers harbour secret fears that we are not nearly as talented and successful as everyone else. My presence likely amplified those insecurities, as all the teachers' hidden fears were now channelled into my notebook. However, when teachers sought reassurance about the quality of their work, their requests for feedback were met with silence or otherwise evaded.

Factors specific to the English accountability regime and this particular school further aggravated this dynamic. First, the dominant models for lesson observation in the English context are inspection and performance management. In these models, the point of observation is to evaluate the teacher and any conversation that follows the observation is dominated by the observer telling the teacher how well she or he performed. Second, since the school was under scrutiny for its poor examination results, which were generally cast as evidence of bad teaching, teachers were presumed guilty until proven innocent. Third, coming from a background in teaching and teacher education, and currently studying for a higher degree in Education, attempting to present myself as ignorant or opinion-less, or to ask the sort of "innocent" questions one might expect from an ethnographer, would not have been very credible.

Exploring a non-reciprocal communicative stance

In light of the difficulties outlined above, I attempted in the final months of the research to adopt a more reciprocal communicative stance, sharing my ideas with the teachers in informal post-lesson conversations, in more formal individual feedback conversations and in one group discussion with the entire staff. I describe these attempts, and some of the difficulties encountered, below.

Informal feedback to Miss Becker

As I noted above, Miss Becker often seemed to be asking for feedback in our brief chats after I observed her lessons, and while in the initial months of the research I essentially evaded those requests, in the final months I started to respond to her more candidly, offering her what I intended to be constructive criticism. These conversations were informal, lasted 5-10 minutes, and took place either at the end of the lesson or in the staff room during lunch. She appeared to be receptive to this, but about two weeks after I shifted my stance, she requested to withdraw from the research.

The reasons for her decision were not entirely clear. Mr. Thompson said that the pressures of the Ofsted inspection, attainment targets and workload had become too much for her, that she was “not sleeping, palpitations”. Miss Becker went out of her way to tell me that it was not personal, and to make sure that she was not jeopardizing the project. Mrs. Boyle attributed Miss Becker’s difficulties to her perfectionism. Perhaps my presence – especially when accompanied by critical feedback – was a constant reminder of her imperfections. I may have misinterpreted her implicit requests for feedback – maybe she wanted reassurance rather than criticism. The loss of Miss Becker to the project pained me for three reasons: first, because she was the teacher with whom I was personally closest; second, because her teaching added an important dimension to the research; and third, because I sense that my feedback backfired – that, instead of making her more comfortable, it aggravated an already precariously pressured situation.

Formal feedback interviews.

Around the time of Miss Becker's withdrawal I also began to conduct formal feedback discussions with the other three teachers about specific lessons. For these discussions I prepared a summary and transcript of fragments of the lesson, which I gave to the teacher prior to the interview, along with a brief outline of questions I was interested in pursuing (for example, How do you feel about the lesson? Any themes or issues you would like to discuss? What resources informed your plan?). At the beginning of each discussion I asked if the teachers were also interested in receiving feedback from me, and about what issues. Miss Millpond's answer was typical:

Researcher: The second question I want to ask you, vis-à-vis expectations, is to what extent you want to – I have things that I'm interested in, in terms of research, but it's also a great opportunity to talk about things you're interested in and perhaps to give some feedback on how I see things that you're wondering about. So, the question is, if you're interested in that, and what concerns you might want to raise.

M. Millpond: Yeah, definitely. Just how you're analysing or how you're interpreting what is going on within the classroom. Because you did three sessions together, didn't you? And how you saw that, and was it what you envisaged and did it work, from your point of view?

I tried to divide the discussion into two stages. The first was similar to an interview: I primarily asked questions – about the teacher's feelings, interpretations and motivations. The second stage was marked by a freer exchange of ideas, as I offered feedback – again, with many questions – and received the teacher's responses to my interpretations. However, this formal division did little to deter the teacher from reading evaluation into every question (and assuming the worst).

Researcher: Tell me about auxiliary verbs.

M. Millpond: Auxiliary verbs, oh my God! Did I do it wrong?

Ultimately, an important contribution of this sort of feedback discussion was that it afforded an opportunity to dispel teachers' fears, to reassure them that their work is appreciated (and that the researcher's "secret" agenda is obscure if not irrelevant).

These conversations were also very helpful in terms of gaining teachers' perspectives on the lessons and on my interpretations of them. Consider, for example, the following case, in which the feedback conversation changed my interpretation about what I had observed. Miss Goodwin taught a lesson on the use of apostrophes, including the suffix 's to show possession. At one point in the lesson she dictated from the workbook the following sentence: "I'm always borrowing Dickens' novels from the library." Children were unsure about where to put the apostrophe, and Miss Goodwin instructed them to place it before the "s" because the author's name was "Dicken". At the time I assumed that her error was a momentary lapse or muddle. Indeed, in order to not embarrass Miss Goodwin, I purposely excluded the "Dicken's" episode from the transcript of lesson excerpts I prepared for our feedback interview. However, one of the pupils asked, "what is Dicken's first name?" in an excerpt we did discuss, which reminded her of the event, which she then proceeded to open up, recounting what had happened and explaining that she had presented the answer that way in order to avoid confusing the children with a grammatical rule they had not yet learned (see citation deleted for analysis of that lesson).

The staff meeting.

As part of this attempt to adopt a more reciprocal communicative stance I also approached Mrs. Boyle and offered to present my research findings to the staff. She welcomed the opportunity to promote reflection and set aside for this purpose one of the weekly staff meetings. The meeting involved the following stages:

1. *Introduction:* I reminded participants of the research aims, questions and method, and outlined key ideas. I framed the research as challenging the following four common assumptions (thereby signalling my own positions):

- a. Prescriptive curricular materials determine teaching practice.
 - b. Literacy is a set of skills and strategies.
 - c. "Dialogue" is an ideal model for educational discourse.
 - d. Accountability mechanisms -- for example, SATs, OFSTED, performance management -- measure and advance educational effectiveness.
2. *Case study analysis*: participants explored in small groups a fictional transcript of two lesson fragments, which were based on practices observed in LTPS.
 3. *Plenary discussion* of the case study and, where relevant, presentation of preliminary research conclusions.

I showed this programme and the fictional case study to the four teachers with whom I had been working, Mrs. Boyle and Mrs. Ulwerton, the Literacy Coordinator. The latter two expressed concern that the program was much different from what they usually do at staff meetings, and that, as Mrs. Boyle put it, "their eyes may just glaze over". Mrs. Ulwerton was also worried about the abstract and academic language, and helped me think of alternative terms for "curricular enactment", "accountability mechanisms" and "discourse". The discussion with Mrs. Ulwerton was a significant breakthrough in our relations, since, up until then, she had taken no interest in the research and evaded my attempts to schedule an interview. At the end of our discussion she requested that I observe her teaching.

The session itself was generally successful. The teachers were especially critical of the fictional teacher's discourse patterns, and their criticism led to fruitful exploration – both in terms of research and facilitating reflection – of teacher feedback, questioning and coping with pupil errors. After raising questions about curricular enactment, which I have generally found to generate little interest among LTPS teachers, we engaged in lively debate about the virtues of following the

curriculum guide. Below I have extracted two fragments of the discussion in order to give the reader an idea of the dynamic that developed.

The first fragment comes from the beginning of the discussion. The participants had criticised the teacher's discourse in the (fictional) extract for features which are relatively common in studies of classroom discourse. I briefly review central research findings regarding the structure of classroom discourse, and then pose a question:

Researcher: ...Almost everywhere that research has been done, this has come up. So it's interesting to me that you – in a lot of your comments, you seem to take exception with that – with that framework. Am I understanding correctly?

D. Fisher: I think it depends on the context, because there are some subjects where there are absolutely right and wrong answers, like the answer to a maths problem. And there are others where I think, as a teacher, you should stand back from making certain judgements where there is a range of opinions available.

Researcher: OK. So, even in the ones where there's a right or wrong answer, you were saying before you should investigate. Right? So I'm not sure I understand the difference.

D. Fisher: If there's a right and wrong answer, then it's fair enough to evaluate. But if there aren't hard and fast, right and wrong answers, then I think you have to be very, very careful what you say back, if there can be a range of opinions. You've got to say something that indicates that you value their input, you value their opinion, without sort of saying whether you necessarily agree or disagree, if it's reasonable to have a range of views.

Though I am posing questions, my communicative stance is reciprocal. I had outlined my own views at the outset of the discussion and had set up the context of my questions as differences between what the teachers were saying and what the research led me to expect. Shortly after this exchange Diane Quail agrees that most teachers work in accordance with an IRE structure, and that it is “a good thing to do because everybody needs... a bit of feedback so that I know I've got the right idea and I'm not talking about something that's not necessary or it might be completely off the wall.” Two other teachers disagree with her and she explains why she thinks “you've got to have something coming back” (quoted in the article's introduction).

From this topic the discussion moves to strategies for widening participation in classroom discourse, and then to the influence of the teaching objectives. I use this last issue as an opportunity to raise one of my key research questions:

Researcher: ... [The fictional teacher] should be demonstrating how to mark a text. And what she does is, she turns this demonstration session into basically a IRE question and answer session about the text. And one of the questions I'm asking is, why does that happen? And – and what I want to propose – yes, Betty.

B. Oliver: I think she's holding to the text and I'd describe it as slavish.

Researcher: Excuse me?

B. Oliver: She is just following – she is just asking these questions and only these questions, she's lost sight of the overall objective, which is to teach children to mark the text. And she's got these words she's going to discuss, come hell or high water, whatever the children are going to discuss – want to discuss, that's what she's going to do. So, she is slavishly following the example.

Researcher: Do you the rest of you all agree with that?

K. Thompson: I'd only look upon that as exemplification, it's not actually to be followed exactly as it's there. (It's) an example. And I don't think people – we don't follow the exemplification –

B. Oliver: No, but I –

D. Quail: A lot of people do.

K. Boyle: (She) thinks that some teachers do.

D. Quail: Yeah, they do.

K. Thompson: Oh, yeah. There's a danger in that, if you're given all that material.

K. Boyle: Again, there is some British research, (xxxx), that does suggest that younger teachers, who've come into the profession since the National Curriculum, Numeracy and Literacy Strategies, were [dramatic pause] given to us [laughter], that's what they know to teach to, that's all they've had as experiences in their own teacher training environment. And they haven't got the same capacity for just making it up as you go along, going off on a tangent that is appropriate, or being very inventive.

–: It's security, isn't it?

K. Boyle: Exactly, yes, the security of the text is what people are craving as opposed to the inventiveness of the approach pre-National Curriculum.

K. Thompson: They actually give you the first two days verbatim, what you should say and the responses. If you actually look at the exemplification, you'll see. They give you day one and they give you a word-for-word text to actually read.

D. Quail: Well they do in the unit plans, but you have to be able to –

K. Thompson: You get thrown if you don't get the right answer [laughs].

D. Quail: Yeah, but that's what I think we're saying, if you're more experienced or you're brave enough, you don't do that. You might start off with that but, then, if a child brings up something else, then that's what you go on to. You don't say, "No, we're not going to talk about that because I've got to go on to this now."

K. Thompson: Some people do.

D. Quail: Yes, I know. That's what Kathy's saying, (perhaps) younger people are using it as a – while people with more experience perhaps realise, "Oh well, you know, I'll take this section now."

Researcher: Yeah? Iris, please.

I. Ulwerton: Well, I think it's OK to think that because some of us are older that we can play fast and loose with – [much laughter and commotion]

I find this latter excerpt interesting on a number of levels, and – while I cannot analyse it in detail here – I will briefly comment on the sort of issues it raises and upon its qualities as data.

At the beginning of the excerpt I raise the question as to why the teacher deviates from the lesson plan provided by the NLS, recontextualising the prescribed activity into the IRE recitation structure. I am about to launch into explanation of one of my research findings (see citation deleted), but instead call upon Betty Oliver who is bidding for the floor. Dr. Oliver (she is a chemist) makes the provocative statement that the teacher is slavishly following the text. My interpretation of this statement as provocative is based on how Dr. Oliver emphasises the word, how the participants respond, and also the way I had framed the transcript: a fictional extract based on practices observed in the school. So, indirectly at least, Dr. Oliver is accusing some of the teachers at the school of slavishly following curricular prescriptions.

Mr. Thompson, who is one of the teachers I have been observing, indeed responds as if the criticism had been levelled at him, and clarifies that he views the materials as exemplification, rather than prescription. Ms. Quail and Ms. Boyle respond by pointing out that some teachers do treat the materials slavishly, thereby

implying that they accept that he does not. The question still remains, if not Mr. Thompson, who are those slavish teachers?

Headteacher Kathy Boyle suggests a solution: it is the younger generation of teachers who slavishly follow the materials. (She also takes a dig at me, my U.S. accent and the primarily U.S. research to which she assumes I have been referring.) The others – all veteran teachers – then begin to analyse why this might be the case. None of the younger teachers, who are all present in the room, contribute to this discussion of their alleged shortcomings. Finally, at end of the excerpt, Mrs. Ulwerton, the Literacy Coordinator, questions whether the veterans are taking too many liberties: “playing fast and loose with” the requirements.

As data, these excerpts are much richer and more informative than the individual interviews I have conducted. This is especially true with regard to the topic being addressed, which I had found difficult to explore in interviews. Moreover, the group discussion allows investigation of social and political contexts which do not readily lend themselves to research through individual interviews or (non-interventionist) observation. Thus, while the overt topic of discussion is about following the curriculum, the subtext, directed to the younger teachers, is about novices’ responsibilities and limitations, and the privileges of age. This political facet of curricular enactment would not likely have become apparent if I had not instigated this discussion.

It is interesting to note that I am relatively silent and passive in the latter excerpt. It is plausible that my adoption of a reciprocal stance at the outset of the conversation gave me license to maintain my silence as the discussion unfolded.

Conclusion

The line of thinking developed in this article was set in motion by surprise at the level of animosity I encountered while seeking to research teaching in an English primary school. It is noteworthy that my experiences are consistent with what appears to be a more general phenomenon of English educational practitioners' hostility to being researched (Delamont, 2002; Walford, 2001).

This phenomenon gives rise to a number of inter-related problems and issues, most of which I have touched upon in the preceding narrative. Generally, these problems fall under three categories: personal distress, ethics and epistemology. First, the hostility I encountered made the fieldwork experience frequently distressing and emotionally disturbing. Put simply, I did not want to be in a place in which I felt unwanted. But I do not want to overstate the importance of this issue. The success of the project must be measured in terms of its influence on participants and on the quality of knowledge produced.⁵

The second category of problems is ethical. I have already noted in the narrative description that "consent" is a problematic construct in the particular constellation of forces and pressures at LTPS. Two further ethical issues relate to researcher responsibilities toward research participants. First, while in the field, I encountered teachers and students suffering – both personally and professionally – from difficulties that I thought I could help alleviate. Indeed, as I have already noted in the case of one problem – teachers' insecurity with regard to the quality of their own practice – my presence may have exacerbated their disquiet. Are researchers not responsible to rectify problems to which they contribute, and to help remedy problems they are capable of ameliorating?

⁵ This issue is also related to the access issues discussed below. When slighted, I would often minimize engagement for a while, thereby further distancing myself from participation in school culture.

Second is the issue of representation of the research participants. My research was conducted against the backdrop of acrimonious National policy debates about standards and regulation and in a local school branded as failing. Research can afford teachers' voices a hearing in these debates (alongside those of other participants). Yet, my strained and distanced relationship with the teachers – in particular those teachers who appear to suffer most from the current system – limited my ability to represent their perspective. Moreover, this “advocacy” stance, in which the researcher speaks on behalf of the researched, is riddled with problems and contradictions, leading critics to prefer empowerment (Cameron et al., 1993) or dialogical (Fielding, 2004) approaches.

The third, and in my mind most crucial, category of problems is epistemological, i.e. the breadth, depth and quality of data gathered, and the accuracy and insightfulness of knowledge constructed. A first source of threat to the quality of inquiry are the access problems discussed above, which limited the range of potential sites and cases for examination. Second, the strained nature of my interactions with the teachers limited my understanding of their perspective: how they make sense of their work, the curriculum, the lessons and the wider context. While participants' perspectives are generally important, they are especially critical in projects such as my own, which question intentions, interpretations and motivations. Third, some of the issues I was interested in pursuing – in particular teacher selection and interpretation of curricular materials – rarely occurred publicly. There was no forum at which they naturally arose as a topic of deliberation.⁶ Only in conversation with the teachers was I able to bring these issues to conscious reflection.

⁶ I did participate-observe in a few planning sessions, which were most helpful. However, contrary to my expectations, most of the issues in which I am interested were not explicitly discussed in those sessions (in and of itself a significant finding).

By shifting toward a more reciprocal communicative stance I hoped to find a way out of this predicament, thereby improving relations and knowledge production. I discussed three different ways in which I sought to engage in mutual exchanges with research participants, and the role conflicts and pressures that arose as a result.

Before closing, I would like to briefly revisit the justifications for the non-reciprocal stance cited in the beginning of the article: How relevant are those issues to this case? First is the concern that by disclosing his or her own views, the researcher may alienate and/or offend research participants, thereby jeopardising access. And, indeed, it is likely that my feedback to Miss Becker was one of the reasons for her withdrawal from the research. On the other hand, it is arguable that my lack of openness about my own views alienated other teachers and fuelled their anxieties. My non-reciprocal communicative stance violated the implicit moral obligations the interaction order places on conversants (Goffman, 1983) and as such perhaps caused greater offence than if I had voiced opinions with which they disagreed. Indeed, “protecting” teachers through evasion seems more disrespectful than criticising them.

Second is the concern that researcher openness may be interpreted as taking sides in the various disputes, conflicts and alliances that divide research participants. However, in this case, the way I was introduced into the research site already identified me as accomplice to the Headteacher – silence about my views may have only served to strengthen that impression.

The third concern relates to validity: that by intervening in the research object the researcher contaminates the data. For example, teachers may tell the researcher what they think she or he wants to hear, adapting their own views to those espoused by the researcher. This concern is legitimate, and ethnographers need to be alert to their influences upon the practices they study. But rather than seeking to minimise

our involvement in the research object, Burawoy (1998) suggests that social researchers “embrace the ethnographic condition”:

It is by mutual reaction that we discover the properties of the social order. Interventions create perturbations that are not noise to be expurgated but music to be appreciated... Institutions reveal much about themselves when under stress or in crisis, when they face the unexpected as well as the routine. (p. 14)

An example of this dynamic from the case discussed above is the way in which my intervention in the staff meeting raised unexpected issues that brought to the surface power relations between veteran and novice teachers.

In conclusion, the primary purpose of the article has been to problematise a commonly accepted communicative stance in ethnography, and thereby to carve out some space for thinking about the possibilities of using feedback as a research tool. While I do not think I have idealised the reciprocal communicative stance, I have undoubtedly over-emphasised its potential advantages while understating its problems and risks. Moreover, the research project described only briefly engaged with feedback conversations as a research method. This article has attempted to initiate discussion of the topic, not to have the last word.

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