

May 1998

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Processing the “Critical” in Literacy Research: Issues of Authority, Ownership, and Representation

Amy Goodburn

With the “social turn” of language in the past decade within English studies, ethnographic and teacher research methods increasingly have acquired legitimacy as a means of studying student literacy. And with this legitimacy, graduate students specializing in literacy and composition studies increasingly are being encouraged to use ethnographic and teacher research methods to study student literacy within classrooms. Yet few of the narratives produced from these studies discuss the problems that frequently arise when participant observers enter the classroom. Recently, some researchers have begun to interrogate the extent to which ethnographic and teacher research methods are able to construct and disseminate knowledge in empowering ways (Anderson & Irvine, 1993; Bishop, 1993; Fine, 1994; Fleischer, 1994; McLaren, 1992). While ethnographic and teacher research methods have oftentimes been touted as being more democratic and nonhierarchical than quantitative methods—which oftentimes erase individuals’ lived experiences with numbers and statistical formulas—researchers are just beginning to probe the ways that ethnographic and teacher research models can also be silencing, unreflective, and oppressive. Those who have begun to question the ethics of conducting, writing about, and disseminating knowledge in education have coined the term “critical” research, a rather vague and loose term that proposes a position of reflexivity and self-critique for all research methods, not just ethnography or teacher research.¹ Drawing upon theories of feminist consciousness-raising, liberatory praxis, and community-action research, theories of critical research aim to involve researchers and participants

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Published in *English Education*, Vol. 30. No. 2 (May 1998), pp. 121-145. © 1998 The National Council of Teachers of English. Used by permission. <http://www.ncte.org>

in a highly participatory framework for constructing knowledge, an inquiry that seeks to question, disrupt, or intervene in the conditions under study for some socially transformative end. While critical research methods are always contingent upon the context being studied, in general they are undergirded by principles of non-hierarchical relations, participatory collaboration, problem-posing, dialogic inquiry, and multiple and multi-voiced interpretations. In distinguishing between critical and traditional ethnographic processes, for instance, Peter McLaren says that critical ethnography asks questions such as “[u]nder what conditions and to what ends do we, as educational researchers, enter into relations of cooperation, mutuality, and reciprocity with those who we research?” (p. 78) and “what social effects do you want your evaluations and understandings to have?” (p. 83). In the same vein, Michelle Fine suggests that critical researchers must move beyond notions of the etic/emic dichotomy of researcher positionality in order to “probe how we are in relation with the contexts we study and with our informants, understanding that we are all multiple in those relations” (p. 72). Researchers in composition and literacy studies who endorse critical research methods, then, aim to enact some sort of positive transformative change in keeping with the needs and interests of the participants with whom they work.

Of course, even those who advocate critical transformative research methods recognize the difficulties involved in achieving such lofty goals. As Yvonna Lincoln suggests, positing an entirely cooperative model of research is unreasonable and unreflective of social realities in which researchers and participants operate. Given the unequal relations of power and access that people have in various social institutions—particularly educational settings—enacting a highly democratic and empowering research process is an ideal to be struggled for, rather than a method to be instituted. Yet, so few critical research narratives exist within educational literature that it is easy to be idealistic and naive when designing and undertaking such research. This absence of critical narratives has left many composition researchers, like myself, unprepared for the oftentimes confusing, disorienting, and painful moments between participants and researchers in the research process and, more importantly, has contributed to researchers’ oversimplifications and generalizations about what empowerment means for research participants.² Theories of critical research have been decidedly *uncritical* when it comes to actual practice.

This essay provides one account of a messy, critical research process, drawn from my dissertation project: a study of students’ and teachers’ responses within three university writing courses which were focused on “The American Experience” and which fulfilled the institution’s diversity requirement. My interest in describing these moments involves my desire to achieve some degree of methodological metaknowledge about the ways

that my research process failed to be critical. At the same time, I hope that this narrative provides future literacy and composition researchers some questions for reflection before engaging in similar critical work. I first became interested in literature on critical research processes when I began formulating a topic for my dissertation study: an examination of how students and teachers negotiate issues of authority in writing classrooms where issues of difference are the focus. Since I was interested in studying issues of power, authority, and resistance between and among teachers and students, it seemed fitting that my research process should be highly conscious and reflective about these issues as well. I felt that the *process* of studying multicultural pedagogies within writing classrooms should be informed by critical research principles of collaboration, shared negotiation, open interpretation, and so on, for all its participants—students, teachers, and researchers.³

To begin this inquiry, I chose to observe three writing classrooms, one as a teacher-researcher in my own class and two as a participant-observer in classes taught by two other teachers (Carol and Ann).⁴ In addition, I hired an undergraduate, Mindy, to be a participant observer within my class. As participant observers, Mindy and I studied these three classes throughout the entire term: attending and audiotaping all class sessions, taking field notes, collecting student writing and interviewing students. Mindy met with me once a week to discuss her views of how the class that I was teaching was going, and I met frequently with the other two teachers to discuss issues that were arising for them, both in their teaching and in the research process itself. I had hoped that this multilayered approach would provide all the participants opportunities to name and share their experiences in these classrooms in meaningful and empowering ways.

By the end of the semester, I had over eighty audiotapes, three filing cabinet drawers of student writing, three folders of fieldnotes, and more questions than answers about the ways that this study was a form of critical research. Although I had conducted ethnographic studies within two other classrooms prior to this study and had read widely about critical ethnographic and teacher-research methods, nothing had prepared me for the painful conflicts, confusions, misunderstandings that arose in the process of this research, not only during the term in which I was present within these classrooms, but also in “writing up” and disseminating this knowledge to others. In many ways, the problematics of the research process itself were much more compelling to me than the multicultural issues that I had initially set forth to study. Even now, although several years have elapsed since this study ended and I am no longer in contact with the students or the teachers involved in it, the process of this research continues to trouble me.

As in most ethnographic studies, issues of authority roles, particularly the negotiation of the participant observer role, were central to this study.

Based on previous experiences in observing writing classrooms, I knew that negotiating my roles and expectations among the needs and expectations of students and teachers would be a key issue. From the onset, I envisioned a collaborative and participatory arrangement whereby I would meet frequently with teachers and students to discuss what issues were central to them and to share my readings of classroom events. The night before the classes began, I wrote in my journal:

I want the teachers and students to feel that they have a say in what type of research is being conducted and to be able to contribute to it. If this methodology is going to be “critical” in keeping with the goals of critical pedagogy. I will have to allow room for teachers, students, and Mindy, my student researcher, to help direct my role in terms of what data I collect and how I interpret it. It all seems rather slippery now. (1/3/93)

Because I was a teacher who was being observed as well as a participant observer, I hoped that sharing my own stories with Carol and Ann would foster an interdependence between us in empowering ways. And, in some ways, these meetings and shared responses did empower the teachers in small ways: through sharing materials, discussing students* responses, venting frustrations, and sympathizing with one other throughout the term. For instance, in the beginning weeks of the term, Carol, Ann, and I felt incredibly frustrated by the ways our classes “got behind” on our syllabi. As we shared our frustrations, we realized that it was the multiple goals of the course itself, teaching critical reading and writing, examining issues of difference, teaching students how to use computers, and so on—not our failure at time management—that left us and our students overwhelmed.

Sharing stories with Carol and Ann became a positive and empowering process as we learned to construct what Brannon and Knoblauch (1993) describe as *prepositional knowledge*, narratives that led us to reconsider our initial judgments and make more critical pedagogical choices. Moments that we initially read as indicative of our failures as teachers became reconceptualized and understood in terms of larger pedagogical and institutional issues. After deciding that the current syllabi were not meeting our students* needs, each of us chose to redesign our class syllabus, eliminating some course readings and focusing more explicitly on incorporating in-class writing time. Ultimately, though, negotiating authority roles in this research process entailed more conflict than collaboration, as all three teachers faced painful and frustrating moments in being observed. Foregrounding the different ways that researchers and teachers were reading each others* actions in these classrooms highlights the complexity of negotiating authority roles within classroom settings, particularly when the researcher is a member of the same institutional community.

Claiming Authority Roles

Carol had probably the least traumatic time in having a researcher within the class. A Ph.D. student who was preparing to take her comprehensive exams in composition and creative writing, Carol was very interested in the goals of this project. In fact, Carol was planning to study issues of authority between teachers and students for her own future dissertation project and had conducted teacher research in a course that she had taught the year before.

Carol and I knew each other from several different contexts within the English department: we had taken together two graduate courses in composition, we held a shared interest in writing pedagogy, and we had a mutual community of composition and rhetoric graduate students and faculty with whom we were friends. When I approached her about being an observer in her class, she was understandably hesitant to commit to such a time-consuming project at the same time that she was preparing for her upcoming exams. Saying “I expect to be the very best teacher in the entire universe every single time,” Carol was wary of having an observer in her classroom the one term in which she feared that her studies would detract her attention from her students. Despite her initial hesitation, however, Carol was extremely interested in having an ethnographer in her classroom because she wanted to become more reflective about her own teacher-research practices. Since she planned to conduct teacher-research for her own dissertation project, she thought my presence would encourage her to study her own practices more critically.

Because Carol’s main research interest was in studying issues of authority, one of our first priorities was defining my role so that I would not undermine Carol’s authority or her pedagogical goals. While neither of us could know at the time, this issue of defining and negotiating authority among teacher and researcher would create hidden tensions and conflicts in her class throughout the term. In an interview prior to the study, Carol described her teaching as a day-by-day approach which emphasizes negotiation with her students’ interests:

I try to make the classroom experience as much fun and interesting as possible. By seeing what happens the day I go in. Sometimes I have a plan and sometimes I don’t. And sometimes we cover the reading and sometimes we don’t. A lot of times it depends on what starts to happen in class. And I have a habit of asking students if we’re done with this yet. And sometimes they say “yes” and sometimes they say “no.” And if they say “yes,” we move on. ... I would like for my students to be interested in what they’re doing and that’s the reason I try to offer them responsibilities for what they’re doing. ... I found over the last several quarters that students get frustrated because I keep giving [authority] back. [I say]

*What do you want to do, what do you think.’ Sometimes they want me, because I’m the teacher, to say. And I don’t, (taped interview, 1/5/93)

Because one of Carol’s key goals in this class was to value student authority, she was particularly concerned about what my role would be in her classroom. In particular, she was concerned that since I was also a teacher in the department that students might view me as another “teacher figure” in the class, especially in the small groups which she views as primary sites where students take authority for their own learning. Prior to the first day, then, Carol delineated boundaries in terms of where I would sit and how I might participate in small groups:

- Carol:* I guess I’m torn. I don’t have any idea how they are going to think of you. If they are going to think of you as a teacher, I don’t want you in the groups. *Amy:* It’s going to depend on the class dynamics of what they let me do.
- Carol:* Here’s the thing. If I start treating you like one of my students, okay, here’s the group, Amy, Matt, blah, blah, blah, that might work for you.
- Amy:* Or, if I just join a group, whichever seems to be working or whatever.
- Carol:* Yeah. Which do you like better?
- Amy:* Whatever’s best for your class. We can decide it as we go along.
- Carol:* That’s fine. Because I’m real interested in what you’re going to find out. (taped interview, 1/5/93)

On the first day of class, then, I introduced myself as a researcher in a doctoral program who was interested in studying students’ experiences in intermediate writing courses. I decided not to disclose the fact that I was a teacher to the students (unless they asked) because I aimed to get a “student perspective.” But this arrangement did not erase Carol’s concern with authority issues. Indeed, the issue of authority became central to how Carol read my participant observer role in her class. Initially Carol’s concern was that I would assume an authoritative role as a teacher in a class where she worked so hard to decenter her own authority. By carefully demarcating the boundaries of where I could sit, whom I could observe, and how I could participate, Carol and I negotiated authority in the same ways that she aimed to do with students. Both of us wanted to make my role as unobtrusive as possible so that I could conform to the demands and needs of the students and Carol. After the second class, we decided that I wouldn’t be placed in a specific group. Rather, I would join a different group each class period, engaging in discussions and small group

activities. As an early journal entry suggests, I was highly conscious of how my role might be read by Carol and the students:

During the second hour, Carol put the class back into groups to discuss the readings on tribalism. I joined the same group that I was in during the first hour. During this discussion I began to participate more and more until, by the end, I think I was dominating the discussion a little.... I don’t know how the students felt about my entering the conversation (or how Carol felt, for that matter). I’m going to ask her if she minded, or if she was even aware that I was participating so actively. She did come over once to ask me if the group was ready to discuss the articles with the full class but I told her no. She asked me as if I were leading the group, not just a student in the group. But the students seemed to treat me more like a student. They helped me make out a seating chart for everyone which I used while I was taking notes. And more students said “hi” to me today than ever before. I feel like I’m always treading thin ice in both Ann and Carol’s classes because I never know where to draw the line in terms of participation in discussion. (1/19/93)

Carol seemed comfortable with this arrangement and the students did as well.

As the term progressed, however, Carol became frustrated with how students were engaging in the course material and how they were “refusing” to take authority for their own learning. In interviews with Carol, she frequently negatively compared her students with the class that she had taught the previous term, saying that her current class was a failure in her eyes because she was being forced to “be the teacher” in ways that she didn’t want. In a meeting following one class in which a student, Suzy, monopolized a class discussion, Carol described her own ambivalence about wanting to give authority to students while, at the same time, achieving her goals as the teacher:

I’m having a really horrible time with this class. I feel way out of control. Nobody’s learning anything. It was such a disaster yesterday. Here’s this freewriting about yesterday. I wanted to know what you saw about Suzy because I felt like I lost the whole rest of the class when that was happening. But I couldn’t get away from her eyes and I knew if I looked around at the class, I would be cutting her off. I was starting to get like, “Will you just shut up!” (taped interview, 1/27/93).

As Carol’s frustrations with the ways students were engaged with the course goals increased, her view shifted as to how I would best benefit her. While she began the term worried that I would take authority and adopt a teacher role, following this “failed” class discussion she said that she wished I would become the “teacher figure” so that she wouldn’t have to. Carol’s concern for how I was reading her teaching, coupled with her frustrations about

how students were responding, led her to write a three-page journal describing the class and ending with a wish that I would teach her class: “What did Amy see? I need a plan—So I can read for generals in peace, so I can sleep at night. I think I’ll give this to Amy and get her input too—Maybe she could just teach the class for me this [quarter] so I can get my feature writing done” (1/27/93).

Although Carol’s journal might be described as wishful thinking, representative of any teacher who is tired and wants someone else to take the load, she told me in a meeting that she wished I would take a more authoritative role in helping lead discussions. It was at this point in the term that Carol said that my participant-observer role was not benefiting her because she wanted me to work with her as a colleague in the class to help direct the class discussions, to help her achieve her goals:

Carol: I sort of have been looking over you sometimes cause I don’t want to treat you like a teacher. Cause I know you don’t want that. It’s like, “Okay, Amy, help me out here.” I’ve been tempted to but you don’t want me to.

Amy: Yeah. I don’t want to act like the teacher.

Carol: No. I won’t say “help” ever. But I wanted to say it yesterday. (1/27/93)

Carol’s plea for help from another teacher, rather than a researcher, highlighted the complex tensions involved in negotiating my goals as a researcher while, at the same time, sharing my interpretations with her outside the class so that she could make more effective pedagogical choices as a teacher. Because we had seemingly worked out the boundaries of our relationship at the beginning of the term, I was unprepared to renegotiate these parameters in the terms that Carol said she needed. As a fellow teacher, I wanted to work with Carol to help her achieve her goals. But I also didn’t want to give up the role that I had already established in the class, a participant who was considered more of an ally with other students than with Carol. Because my tape recording and notetaking marked me as a researcher, students did not look to me as a teacher in terms of leading class discussions or activities. I felt that if Carol turned to me and said “As a teacher, what do you think?” my relationships with them would probably shift.

At the same time, I felt guilty because I knew that Carol was consciously struggling with the role that I occupied in the classroom. We did meet outside of her class often and talked at great length about class dynamics and ways she might accomplish her goals, but through the rest of the term, I remained concerned that my unwillingness to take on the authority of a “teacher figure” reflected negatively on my research goals. Although I intended for the research process to be mutually empowering for me and

the teachers, when Carol suggested that changing my role in the class would be more beneficial to her goals as a teacher, I resisted because such a change did not seem beneficial to me as a researcher or to the students. The complexity of negotiating reciprocity for research participants was brought to the fore as Carol and I struggled to negotiate roles that would benefit both of us in different ways.

By the end of the term, student interviews suggested that my role as a researcher had been viewed in terms of a student or as a participant, not as a teacher. Students commented most on how I “fit in” with groups and participated in class discussions. Most said that while they had been initially hesitant in having a researcher in the class, the ways that I participated alleviated their concerns. For instance, Tim said:

I was afraid you were going to sit there with your yellow legal pad and just constantly scribble down notes and just sit in the front of the class and be obvious. But you sat in the middle and had your input and had good questions. I think you blended in perfectly, (taped interview, 3/18/93)

Kathy also used the phrase “blended in” to describe my role in the class:

I think maybe like the first day you came into class I was like, “what is this?” You know, but after that, you just blended in, you know. And sometimes you’d jump into the discussions, which I think was really neat because it made you more of a participant than just someone sitting there. Because it made you jump into it and see what it was really like for us. It was kind of nice to get feedback from someone other than the teacher and other than the students, you know? (taped interview, 3/19/93).

Kathy’s view that I was neither teacher nor student seemed to be shared among most of the students in Carol’s class. Because I did not receive a grade or help facilitate a student-led discussion, my role in the class was definitely not a student. Twenty-five-year-old Alice was the only one who described me as a student, mainly because we were similar in age:

You’re also an older student, which has helped bring, you know, not Carol’s opinion, your opinion, which is good. I’m glad that you participated and didn’t just sit there. You brought a perspective into the class, (taped interview, 3/15/93)

While I was relieved that students viewed me in such terms, I remained concerned that Carol was still unhappy with the ways that I refused to take authority as another teacher. By the end of the term, though, Carol seemed to have forgotten about this conversation on how I could assert my authority to help her achieve her goals. Indeed, in our interviews, she emphasized her initial fears that I would occupy a role as a teacher figure instead of as a participant observer. Carol said that even though I seemed to fit in with the students, she feared throughout the term that I would

undermine her authority in trying to promote a decentered class. In summarizing the impact of my presence in her class, Carol said that she had been concerned throughout the term that I would try to be “the teacher” instead of a participant observer and thus subvert her authority in “giving” power to her students. “That wasn’t the case, but I didn’t know what was going to happen,” she said (meeting, 5/4/93). Carol’s statements surprised me because she never explicitly referred to these concerns after our initial meeting and because I thought that she was more concerned about how I could *be* a teacher Figure in her class. Carol’s comments highlight the difficulties that teachers face when observers are in their classrooms.

Even though she had studied her own classroom before, Carol was not prepared for how my presence would make her self-conscious about her practices. In describing the difference she felt between the winter term and the class she was teaching in the spring, Carol said that she was much more relaxed and having more fun because she wasn’t worried about how her actions would be read by me: “I’m not concerned with how I would be in this dissertation and I’m not a researcher of my own class” (meeting, 5/4/93). My experiences in Carol’s classroom illustrate how the authority of the participant observer cannot be easily dismissed or negotiated away. Although she said overall the project was a positive experience, she was relieved when it was over and she could have a “normal” class. For Carol, my location as a teacher in the same institutional community brought expectations of who I might be as a participant observer, expectations that were not easily redefined or mitigated. Ultimately, Carol’s concerns about the roles that I could play in her classroom seemed inextricably tied to her own struggles to both define herself as a teacher and yet “give up” authority to her students, an already complex dance of negotiations that was further compounded by my presence.

Defining Ownership

Beyond negotiating authority roles in these classrooms, a second issue which highlighted the difficulty of enacting a critical research process involved defining and contesting ownership over the data that was produced. Questions such as “Who owns materials produced in the classroom?” and “Who owns the reading of classroom events?” were especially important in terms of the relationships between participant observers, teachers, and students in this study. Ann’s reading of my role in her class was integrally tied to these questions of control and ownership.

Initially Ann had agreed to participate because she hoped that the study would make her a more self-conscious and reflective teacher, especially in terms of teaching about multicultural issues. Ann’s interest in

multicultural issues was both pedagogical and scholarly. As a Ph.D. Student specializing in 19th century women writers and feminist theory, Ann was committed to using texts that focused explicitly on issues of race, class, gender, and issues of difference in ways that encouraged students to think and write critically about their own social locations. Another area of Ann’s expertise was in the use of technology, particularly her teaching experiences in computer-supported classrooms. Based on this expertise, Ann was selected as a consultant for the Department’s computers and writing program and worked with other teachers to develop appropriate curriculum for these classrooms. Although I did not have an extensive prior history with Ann before the study began, we did have some mutual friends in the Department and, ironically, had attended the same undergraduate institution where we had lived in the same residence hall several years before.

In a two-hour interview before the study began, we discussed Ann’s views about teaching and writing, the choices that she had made in designing her syllabus, and the roles that I might play in her classroom in relation to her goals. Despite these discussions, though, from the onset Ann felt extremely vulnerable and defensive about my presence in her classroom, primarily because she found it difficult to view me in any role beyond evaluator of her teaching. Her feelings of vulnerability were so extensive, in fact, that during a meeting two weeks in the term, she said that she tried not to look at me or any of the students near me in the hope that not acknowledging my presence would render me invisible (fieldnotes, 1/25/93). In considering my goals as a critical researcher, I tried to imagine ways that I could alleviate Ann’s fears without abandoning the study altogether. One way I hoped to foster a dialogue with her was by sharing an essay that I had found useful in interpreting my own class’s dynamics. In my journal I wrote:

The essay was about the frustration of critical pedagogy in a university setting where the students are mainly white and privileged. I didn’t want to offend her by suggesting that she needs the essay, but it described accurately and sensitively how I felt in my class this quarter and I thought she might be feeling the same way. I’ll see tomorrow what she thought of it. I want to make my research relevant to her life and not just a chore for her to endure. She really dislikes my observing her class; she didn’t realize that my presence would be so obtrusive. I have tried to remain in the background but I can’t disappear the way she wants me to. Well, I could. I could quit attending her class. I don’t think her class is going as poorly as she thinks it is and I hope my presence isn’t the major factor in having her feel like her class is a failure. ... I have to really think about what benefits Ann can derive from my class. In terms of reciprocity, how can I make her life and the lives of her students better in the classroom? I guess the article I gave her today is one attempt at trying to make her

feel that she is getting something out of this research, that I understand how she’s feeling and that I feel the same way. I don’t know if she will take it that way, though. I’m not trying to “teach” her how to be a better teacher. I just thought she might be interested. I mean to transcribe one of the tapes from her class this weekend and then give it to her. Perhaps when she sees how the classroom dynamics are working in her class, then she and I can collaborate on how to change things, if she and her students desire change. ... I think I’m also going to offer her copies of my notes, so that she can see that I’m not writing down her every move or criticizing what she is doing. I don’t want to be like Andrea Fishman in *Amish Literacy* who got kicked out of the Amish school because she didn’t understand the needs of the people she was observing. I need to be more sensitive. (1/22/93)

Showing Ann my fieldnotes about class interactions did seem to alleviate some of her concerns about how I was reading her classroom, and since we shared similar political agendas, we also discussed ways that she could “strategically” call on me in class as a way of getting her viewpoint heard. Despite these measures, though, my presence disturbed her sense of authority as a teacher throughout the term.

It was only six months after the study ended, while we were writing a conference paper about our experiences, that Ann told me part of her anxiety stemmed from the fact that I had worked as an administrative assistant two years previously for the first-year writing program. In that capacity, I had assisted the Director of the program in a seminar on the teaching of writing for new teaching assistants and had observed and evaluated teaching assistants during their first year. Ann had been a member of this class and thus associated me with institutional administrators whom she felt were too intrusive in teaching assistants’ lives. While I remembered that Ann had been a member in this class of 45 students. I had not considered this prior relationship as significant in the ways she did. Thus, Ann’s view of me as an administrative evaluator rather than a participant observer remained unacknowledged and thus unchallenged throughout the term that I participated in her class.

Ann’s anxiety also stemmed from her desire to “control” the ways that I read her and students in the class. At the onset, Ann said she wanted to participate in the study because she was interested in becoming a better teacher. But it was clear from the beginning that Ann’s anxiety about my presence overshadowed any benefits she was receiving about her teaching. Because I wanted Ann to gain some reciprocity from her participation, I asked her to co-author an article about how groups of students in her class wrote their collaborative papers. Ann agreed and we wrote a proposal which was accepted.⁵ In collaboratively authoring this text, the tension between Ann and me was slightly minimized. Because Ann was involved in the production of this text, she had control over how I would

read her and the student groups. And, because I shared my field notes and journal entries with her, Ann could see how I was textually representing classroom events. Months later, as Ann and I discussed our relationship during the study, Ann said that co-authoring this text enabled her to see me, for the first time, as an ally rather than evaluator. After this article was written, though, Ann’s participation in the study seemed to end. I began transcribing tapes and reviewing data while Ann took her general exams. The summer passed, and in the fall I began preparing for the job market by compiling a writing sample based on her class. It was during this time that issues of ownership between Ann and me began to emerge again.

As a researcher, I found it difficult to re-negotiate the boundaries of our relationship once the term of the study ended. In writing a necessarily single-authored dissertation, I assumed primary ownership over the materials. I hoped to draft chapters on each classroom and cycle them to Carol and Ann for responses. But while both said that they were interested, they understandably had their own work to consider as well. When I gave Ann a draft chapter on her class (upon her request), she said that she would respond to me in writing. A week later, when we passed in the hallway, she said it had been “strange” reading the chapter and for some of my readings of classroom events she had written in the margins “wrong, wrong, wrong.” When I asked her which parts, she said she couldn’t remember. I said I looked forward to reading her interpretations, but she never gave them to me. Because Ann did not reply, I assumed that she was not interested in the project. But several months later, in a second co-authored paper we wrote about the process of the study, Ann said that she was angered that I didn’t consult her before my writing process began. Because she felt that the data produced in the class belonged to her and the students, she was angered by what she considered my appropriation of it. In this paper, Ann wrote:

The shift from being integral in formulating interpretations of the class to feeling alienated from the process was difficult for me because I did feel a sense of ownership for the data Amy had collected and believed that the class “belonged” much more to me and the students than to Amy. (3/19/94).

Ann’s statements surprised me because, as a participant observer, I considered myself as part of the class as well. I didn’t consider that Ann would resent the ways that I assumed primary ownership in writing about the data. My primary goal in doing the study—to fulfill the requirements of the Ph.D. program by writing a single-authored dissertation—conflicted with Ann’s expectations that she would be given a primary role in interpreting the data. Although I had offered her an opportunity to challenge my reading of the classroom by asking for her response to a completed draft, by that point

she said she felt too estranged from the process to consider herself a participant in it. Ann’s disenfranchisement from the process of selecting which data were significant left her feeling unable to control the ways that I was reading her classroom, further exacerbating the vulnerability she felt throughout the process.

Another ownership issue involved dissemination of the data collected during the study. During the fall term, the director of the course that I had studied asked me and another graduate student who had studied a different section of the same course to share some of our findings in a training session for new and experienced teachers. I asked Ann’s permission to use data from her class for this session (of which she was a part). But when I distributed copies of response papers that students had written in the class, Ann felt vulnerable because the papers included her handwritten comments. Although I did not identify Ann as the teacher of the class, Ann was so concerned that others would criticize her comments, that she identified herself in the session as the teacher. Six months later when I used the same response papers from Ann’s class for a meeting of a multicultural pedagogy group (of which Ann was not a member), she became very angry because I had not asked her permission. Despite the fact that Ann had signed a consent form prior to the study allowing me to observe and write about her classroom, she still felt that I should have asked her permission before making each piece of research public.

Ann’s feelings of betrayal challenged me to examine my assumptions about who “owned” the data from this classroom. I had assumed that these texts were students’ property, not Ann’s, and because I had received permission from students to use their texts anonymously, I didn’t think it necessary to ask Ann’s permission as well. And I didn’t realize how Ann’s responses were connected to her extreme feelings of vulnerability about her status as a graduate teaching assistant. Ann worried that administrators within the Department might read the students’ papers and her comments out of the contexts in which they were produced and label them as representative of poor teaching. Although Ann had written in a long journal at the beginning of the term that her graduate student status was “rife with possibility and danger,” I had not taken seriously the extent to which she felt under surveillance by writing program administrators. Perhaps because I had worked in several different administrative positions in the Department, I did not consider the administration malevolent in its treatment of graduate teaching assistants, nor had I ever feared such retribution in my own teaching. But Ann clearly did, and her feelings shaped how she viewed my role in interpreting student response from her classroom.

As Ann and I learned, negotiating the boundaries of critical research is difficult and complex work. When we presented a co-authored paper

on difficulties in our research process, Ann spoke about the ethical relationship between participant observers and teachers in the classes they study:

Although Amy’s dissertation is 95 percent about students. I still felt exposed by her work. I believe that my intense need to protect this data and to restrict who could interpret it stems from a sense of vulnerability as a graduate student and insecurity as a teacher. Ethnographers who work with colleagues must be prepared to account for intense feelings of longing or interest in the project from the people they study. (3/19/94)

Ann’s honest appraisal of the ways that she felt disenfranchised from the study illustrated how this research was not empowering for her in the ways I had hoped. Although Ann benefited from the co-authored article that we published, she said in our second co-authored paper that she did not benefit from the production of my dissertation and ultimately she viewed my study of her class in negative terms. The benefits she did feel were not commensurate with the vulnerability and anxiety she experienced throughout the term.

Questioning Representations

Like Carol and Ann, I was also nervous about having a participant observer in my class. Even though I had conceived Mindy’s participation as part of a critical research process that would enable me to take students’ concerns seriously, I was still nervous about the role that Mindy might play in my classroom. Although I wanted access to a “student perspective” within my own class, I didn’t know if I would be prepared to read her observations and analysis, especially if they described my teaching in negative terms. Of course, since I was paying Mindy to adopt this role, she also felt an allegiance to me to “do the job right.” Yet neither of us could articulate what doing the job “right” meant in this context. In our meetings prior to the term, I told Mindy that I was interested in seeing how students respond in classrooms where issues of difference are the focus, but I didn’t give her any direct instructions on how to participate in the class. I provided some different models of field notes and told her to focus on whatever themes or classroom dynamics that she found interesting. It wasn’t until midway through the term that I realized the difficult role I had asked Mindy to play in my classroom.

As an “almost student” who wasn’t being graded and a potential ally but also critic of my practices, Mindy described her role in my class as “schizophrenic.” Sensitive in attending to the feelings of students and astute in recognizing my own frustrations throughout the term, Mindy was placed

in the delicate position of mediating my students’ responses in ways that didn’t hurt my feelings while, at the same time, responding to students’ questions about my practices and feelings. This complex role of student/participant observer/ally left her feeling torn, especially when she was recording student response. Although we met weekly to discuss various roles she could adopt (or was being positioned into) in relation to the students, Mindy had a difficult time deciding when to participate and when to remain at a distance. In describing her interview with Linda, Mindy wrote about the multiple roles she felt forced to play:

She [Linda] had an awful lot to say, but was much more comfortable talking to Mindy the student who can’t wait for the quarter to end so she can go lay on the beach, rather than Mindy the researcher who’s asking her these ten questions that pertain to research and Amy’s thesis. I sort of felt like a divided army, everyone wanting me to choose a camp. But I couldn’t. I was working a job but I was also a student. Needless to say, I’m kind of glad to be back to one personality this quarter. (Mindy’s journal 5/3/93)

Part of the difficulty that Mindy faced lay in the expectations that I had for her role from the onset. I hired her because she was an undergraduate and could, I hoped, provide a perspective close to that of a “typical” student. But students are not paid to describe and interpret other students’ behavior, nor do they generally consider a teacher’s goals or feelings within a class. Mindy’s preference was to associate with students, not record their responses, and she oftentimes felt that she had to make a choice between forming relationships with other students and fulfilling her job responsibilities to me. Although I asked Mindy to be honest in her assessments, her allegiance to the students often led her to disguise or omit analysis which she thought might lead me to view students unfavorably. In her journals, Mindy used the “symbol” typeface font to make such descriptions illegible to me until the end of the term when I turned in student grades.⁶ In this way, Mindy became an advocate for the students in the class, “protecting” their responses from the possibility that I would be punitive in my grading practices if I heard how students really felt about the class. While I appreciated the difficult nature of Mindy’s position in sharing student response, I also wanted her to be more honest so that I could adapt my practices during the term. Since one of my goals was to adapt my teaching practices based on the students’ responses, I found it frustrating that their responses were being hidden from me, however altruistic Mindy’s intentions. At the same time, I could understand Mindy’s reluctance to share their responses, particularly because as a student herself she viewed the institution of grades as a key power differential between students and teachers. Indeed, my feelings of frustration were tied to the same feelings of vulnerability that Ann felt about my presence in her class-

room. Several of my journals reflect fear and anxiety about how my students were viewing me as a teacher:

Tomorrow I meet with Mindy at 11 to discuss how she thinks things are going. I know that she can’t be entirely honest because I am paying her for her participation, but I hope she can give me an accurate gauge of how things are going. Next Tuesday she is going to interview [my students] alone and I don’t know what they are going to say. I’m a little frightened. I know why Ann feels so vulnerable. I may not want to be best buddies with my students but I don’t want them to hate me. Even if they don’t like me. I would like their respect. I don’t know if I have that yet, or if I ever will. (1/25/93)

Two days later, I wrote:

On Tuesday Mindy is going to interview [my students] during the second hour without my being there. I’m nervous about what they’re going to say—I’m sure their criticism is going to hurt—and yet I need to know. (1/27/93)

Part of my anxiety also stemmed from the comparisons that I made between myself and Carol and Ann in terms of teaching styles. For instance, after Carol shared her frustrations by reading a freewrite about classroom dynamics to her students, I wrote:

I thought about Carol’s response to her class on Tuesday prior to the class I taught on Thursday. I should have read a response to [my students on] how I felt on Tuesday about the class discussion but I think I wanted to just repress that class and move on—I’m missing so many opportunities to be open with my class about how I feel and to allow them to share how they feel. I know that I typically avoid conflict so I guess my actions aren’t so surprising but they do tend to disgust me. I say that I’m an emancipatory teacher but I don’t feel that I can even talk honestly with my class or Mindy. (2/6/93)

The commentary Mindy did record and share with me during the term was enlightening. Her analysis increasingly forced me to acknowledge the degree to which students viewed this class’s significance in the context of their daily lives. Although I was highly invested in it—as a teacher and as a researcher—my students viewed this university-required class as simply another academic hurdle. For instance, when I told Mindy that I was surprised and disappointed that more students didn’t sign up for a student panel option, which I envisioned as an opportunity for students to share their own agendas and take authority in the class, Mindy said students chose the written reports because they looked easier, adding that she would have made the same decision. When students didn’t seem invested in their topics for the collaborative projects, Mindy said students were trying to pick “easy topics that didn’t require thought” and that she didn’t blame them because

she always tries to do the least amount of work for the grade that she can. Mindy’s comments forced me to consider how my expectations for this class were vastly different from that of my students. How could I make this research process empowering for students, I thought, if I don’t acknowledge or understand the different realities of their lives? One journal highlighted my frustration in working out what such a process might mean:

I try to present essays that talk about different perspectives, about the need to expand one’s world view. How can I construct a radical “pluralistic language” that affirms difference and provides democratic spaces from which to act? How can I translate all this theory into some sort of practice that will make it easier for me in the classroom? My students are so resistant to some of the ideas that I take for granted. And yet I don’t even like to call it resistance because doesn’t that term assume that I have the knowledge that they are resisting? Where does that leave students like Tim, Bob, and John, who complain that they are being oppressed by all this discourse about diversity? How can I negotiate authority in the classroom when I so strongly disagree with the assumptions upon which they base their arguments? (1/19/93).

In addition to challenging the ways that I read students, Mindy’s analysis of student response also reminded me of the problematic nature of describing and representing others through observation. Even though critical research processes are predicated on the assumptions that all views are limited, partial, and situated, I hadn’t considered what these assumptions meant for my own research methodology until I read Mindy’s self-reflective commentary. I realized part way through the term that even Mindy would not be able to get “the student perspective” because she was just one member within the class. While she certainly had access to students in ways that I did not, she was just as prone to reading them through her biases as I was. Mindy herself recognized the problems inherent in representation when she described how students were responding during one class session. On this day, students were working on their collaborative projects. Some were using the phone to set up interviews with informants, while others further along were typing drafts on computers. Because Mindy was bored and didn’t, in her eyes, see anything exciting, she assumed that the students felt the same way:

A funny thing happened today. I was getting the impression that people were pretty bored with what was happening today, that they were wasting time just sitting around in a classroom. Most people hadn’t done too many interviews, and weren’t very far into their projects. People were working at computers, looking in phone books for resources. I was sitting taking notes, with Phil sitting beside me. I asked how the project was going, all of those kinds of questions. And when he answered, he started talking about how he really loved what was going on that day. He said he loved everyone working at the computers, typing away, people on the

phones, trying to make contacts and interviews. He said it seemed just like a newsroom for a newspaper. (Mindy’s journal, 2/25/93)

Mindy’s limited access to student response was also highlighted by her assessment of one of the quieter students in the classroom, Rachel. Due to Rachel’s silence throughout the term, I had “read” her as not interested in the readings or the course in general. But when Mindy interviewed her, she discovered that not only had Rachel attended to the readings, particularly those about gender, but she was critiquing the class itself on the basis of these readings. In her interview, Rachel described the classroom negotiations with respect to the articles we had read:

We read an article about like gender issues in classroom and that just, I remember reading that and it just made me laugh because I felt like, I don’t know. I just felt like when one of the guys said something that she [Amy] was like so much more open to their ideas. Then when a girl said something...! just don’t think she reacted well. I don’t think she really cared about much that I said in the class, (taped interview, 3/12/93)

While Rachel’s critique of my actions as a teacher was painful, it was also illuminating in terms of how I had read her participation throughout the term. After this interview, Mindy was also forced to reflect upon the limited ability of participant observers to accurately represent the complexity of student response:

She was obviously one of the more insightful women in the class, but she had a way of remaining invisible and unapproachable. I think I did a pretty good job of getting to know almost everyone in the class, but for some reason Rachel sort of got grouped with Jed and Jim—just one of the people I never really knew. And then when I interviewed her, I could have killed myself. She had so much to say, and obviously felt very strongly about it all. I guess I forget pretty often that every one of those people has as many opinions and evaluations of the class as I do. They’ve formed opinions about who they like. and who they don’t like. They know what they thought was fair and unfair. Some of them care a lot less than the others, but they all formed opinions.

I suppose that’s what really hit me with Rachel. This totally withdrawn person who I assumed held a sorority-girl carelessness about the class, actually felt very strongly. She had definite opinions about the actions of her classmates, her groupmates, and Amy. She got very upset and hurt about how she felt her role was being perceived in the class, yet there was no indication of this until the end of the quarter. (Mindy’s journal, 5/3/93)

Mindy’s reading of Phil and Rachel speaks to the complexity in representing others’ responses via ethnographic and teacher-research methods. As Mindy noted at the end of the term: “I felt as though I was watching two separate classes. Amy and I would make guesses about the interaction

between groups, but by the end of the quarter, I realized that half those guesses were wrong” (Mindy’s journal, 4/24/93). Mindy’s willingness to question her own readings of classroom events reminded me to question constantly my own investments in reading Ann’s and Carol’s classes. The difficulty for participant observers is in recognizing how their own perspectives shape the ways that they can view and understand others’ perspectives. Mindy’s presence in my classroom, while oftentimes disorienting and painful for both of us, led us both to appreciate the ethics of representation for critical research practices. The classroom moments we chose to write down in our journals, the ways we interpreted these moments, and the discourse we used in the process of doing so reflected our interests, assumptions, and expectations more than the students’ “realities.” While we could describe classroom interactions with “thick description,” the terms we used to convey and contain such descriptions were indelibly marked by our own biases. In “writing up” the results of this study, then, I realized that the journals Mindy and I kept were more valuable in terms of how they recorded our assumptions and biases than in terms of providing accurate and objective renderings of specific classroom moments.

Mindy’s presence in my classroom also highlighted the ethical dimensions of power involved in representing others’ classrooms. Although the difficulties that emerged between Mindy and I often mirrored those that Carol, Ann, and I faced, they were also minimized because of the differences between Mindy and I in terms of institutional status and power. Because Mindy was a student rather than a graduate student/ teacher, she did not share the same investment in the classroom as Ann and Carol did. While there were times when I wished that Mindy were not observing my teaching, I never felt “under surveillance” or evaluated to the degree that Carol and Ann did. Although I didn’t consider it an important distinction at the time, Mindy’s presence in my classroom was much less threatening because she did not have the authority to criticize my practices on the basis of teaching experience. Moreover, Mindy’s presence within my classroom was temporal, while Carol, Ann, and I continued to work in the same institutional community long after the term of the study was concluded. The long-term consequences for Ann and Carol’s participation in the study—particularly in terms of their professional identities as teachers—were far more significant than Mindy’s, and thus my presence in their classroom was potentially more threatening than was Mindy’s presence in mine.

Implications for Literacy Researchers

Few literacy researchers—especially graduate students who are usually new to research—are prepared for negotiating the myriad issues of authority, ownership, and representation that inevitably accompany such

ethnographic studies, especially those that seek to employ critical processes. And, as the vignettes of Carol and Ann suggest, teachers who agree to participate in such studies are rarely prepared for the dizzying confusion that often accompanies having a participant observer in the classroom. Throughout this project I was reminded that critical research is a positionality rather than a method, a process that is always embedded in institutional, social, and personal power negotiations. At every step of this study (including the production of this text), I was forced to constantly question and redefine what being critical means. Critical for whom? in what respect? at which stage? for whose interests? Given that the classroom is, by its very definition, a striated and unequal space of heterogeneous interests, goals, and investments, how can a researcher possibly accommodate all participants in equally (if not identical) empowering ways? Indeed, it’s difficult to claim the production of this essay as “critical” when none of the teachers or students in the study participated in writing it. But I hope that it is critical in that it raises questions about the impact of what we do to others in the process of research, and how, in many ways, research does us. Thus, I would like to pose some questions that might have been productive for me and the participants to have discussed and negotiated throughout the study.

First, teachers and ethnographers need a heightened awareness of the possible roles that they can claim as well as those which they may be forced to adopt. It is important to recognize that these roles are not clearly defined or stable but are constantly produced and altered by classroom dynamics and institutional contexts. While teachers and participant observers cannot wholly control such roles, the ability to name and claim them can promote more understanding and foster better working relationships. For instance, if I had asked Carol to periodically define or name the roles that she viewed me occupying, I might have learned earlier in the term that she was still concerned with my potential to be a teacher figure in her class. Connected to the ability to name roles is the process of defining terms of reciprocity for all participants. Researchers need to consider what types of reciprocity and/or benefits that participants will receive throughout the study. Like the negotiation of roles, these terms of reciprocity need to be constantly in process as well, particularly when terms initially agreed upon are not meeting the needs of participants. For instance, although Ann felt that the study would benefit her in terms of making her more self-reflective about her teaching, it was clear from the beginning of the study that she was uncomfortable with my presence in her classroom. If a teacher finds an observer’s presence negative, are there other benefits for the teacher and the students? At what point should the observer volunteer to leave? Researchers who are studying classrooms within their own institutional communities need to be especially sensitive to the

ways that other teachers might feel coerced into having participant observers in their classroom. In a large graduate program where many students are specializing in composition, other teachers might feel pressured to have their classrooms studied even when they are not fully invested in such projects. Such a climate of enforced participation might further perpetuate teachers’ feelings of fear and distrust toward a participant observers presence.

Although ideally all participants should receive equal benefits in participating within research studies, researchers need to recognize that, for most projects, there are different levels of investment and benefit for various participants. While I was sincerely interested in learning from students’ and teachers’ responses in these classes as well as providing spaces for teachers to share and learn from their experiences, I also had to acknowledge that this study benefited me most—personally, professionally, and materially—because it fulfilled my Ph.D. requirements and enabled me to secure a job. While I could name this study as important to the field of composition studies, and thus beneficial to future teachers and students, there was no denying that this study was most empowering to me. Acknowledging one’s self-interest as a researcher is key toward understanding how that self-interest affects one’s relationships with other participants. Researchers also need to avoid defining what constitutes reciprocity for participants instead of negotiating such terms with them. For instance, although I viewed the co-authored article and conference presentation with Ann as an example of reciprocity, she did not view these activities as professionally important to her because her scholarly field does not value work in composition studies. And while Mindy initially agreed to work with me in collaboratively interpreting the data after the study was conducted, by the end of the term she chose to take a new university job which paid more. Mindy’s material needs to pay for tuition were much more pressing than her research interest in this study. Recognizing the realities of participants’ lives means exploring a variety of ways that reciprocity can be arranged—in material, professional, and personal terms.

Tied to issues of reciprocity are issues of ownership. While the metaphor of “owning a classroom” is not entirely compatible with the collaborative and non-hierarchical principles of critical research, both teachers and students are oftentimes invested in this privatized view of the classroom. The classroom is rarely viewed as a public space, and teachers often view what is produced in the classroom in terms of their and their students’ own property. Consequently, researchers need to be highly conscious about negotiating permission for collecting materials and data from classrooms. Beyond gaining initial permission for entering a classroom, researchers need to constantly ask questions such as “What constitutes data in this

class? Who owns it? What are the different types of permission that one needs for interpreting this data? For disseminating it? And at what stages do these permissions need to be renegotiated?” For instance, if a student signs a permission slip allowing the researcher to copy all of her texts, should a researcher seek additional permission to copy an essay that seems highly personal or that the student might not want made public, even anonymously? And how should researchers negotiate permission for the ways that the research will be made public, both in the institutional community itself and beyond it? Researchers need to interrogate constantly what it means to collect and study knowledge produced in a classroom, particularly when they intend to claim it as academic intellectual property via the production of research articles, conference presentations, dissertations, and so on.

Lastly, researchers need to be conscious of how they represent themselves and participants at every stage of the research process. Will a researcher periodically share his or her field notes with the participants and will the participants be offered opportunities to challenge or change these representations? Will a researcher write and share analytic memos with participants that summarize emerging themes or issues in the classrooms? Will participants be encouraged to offer their own representations and how will they be compensated or rewarded for doing so? For instance, if a researcher asks a teacher to keep a teaching journal, how will the teacher be compensated for doing so? What are the benefits to the teacher in taking this extra time to write for a researcher? And if participants disagree with a researcher on how they are being represented, what negotiations will be used to resolve or highlight these differences? How will “multi-voiced interpretations” be integrated into field notes or scholarly publications resulting from the study? Researchers need to recognize that while multi-voiced interpretations can alleviate some of the problematics of representing others, they cannot easily solve or erase issues of hierarchy and power within the research process. Asking teachers and students to spend their time writing their own interpretations of an event or issue is not inherently empowering to them—such a request might be seen more as an imposition than a benefit, especially if they are not professionally or materially invested in the project to begin with. Ultimately, enacting a critical research process means being critical and self-reflective about one’s own self-interests and desires as well as being conscious of how the participants’ interests and investments may differ. So while the question “What is a critical research process” remains unanswerable, it does serve as a springboard for literacy researchers and participants to learn from one another in critical and reflective ways.

Notes

1. In particular, I am defining a critical research process as described by Patti Lather in *Getting Smart*, Patricia Maguire in *Action Research*, and Ira Shor in *Empowering Education*. Within composition and literacy studies, Ruth Ray's *The Practice of Theory: Teacher Research in Composition*, Cathy Fleischer's *Composing Teacher-Research: A Prosaic History*, Lil Brannon and Cy Knoblauch's *Critical Teaching and the Idea of Literacy*, and Glenda Bissex and Richard Bullock's *Seeing for Ourselves* have offered similar principles for critical ethnographic and teacher-research processes.

2. Two recent edited collections on critical research processes are notable exceptions: Gesa Kirsch and Peter Mortensen's *Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy* and *Voices & Visions: Refiguring Ethnography In Composition* edited by Cristina Kirklighter, Cloe Vincent, and Joseph M. Moxley. At the time this article was written, neither text had been published.

3. While my dissertation focuses primarily on how students negotiate issues of authority in relation to multicultural pedagogies within writing classrooms, for the purpose of this essay I focus primarily on the teachers' and participant-observers' negotiations. For a more elaborate discussion of critical research issues that students experienced within this study, see *Critical Composition, Pedagogies, and the Question of Authority*, unpublished dissertation, 1994.

4. The names of the teachers, students, and undergraduate observer represented in this piece are pseudonyms, chosen by each respective participant.

5. Ann and I co-authored the proposal during the term of the study and then wrote the article in the following term.

6. Here is an example of the typeface Mindy used: τηρ στυδεντω ωρε ανρηψ.

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