

Learning Matters

Russell Whitehead

Last issue the column was about reading, intensively and extensively. Personally, I accumulate newsletters, journals, magazines and so on in a basket. When I have to go on a train journey, I get them out of the basket, and take them to read on the train. The moving location of this reading space is a feature of my reading. As I was writing about reading, I was wondering how and where the column would be read.

One person who I know did read it was Philip Prowse, here in Cambridge, UK, and in his own house (I think). He has reminded me of an 'absolutely brilliant' book about reading: Alberto Manguel's *A History of Reading*, published by Flamingo. He also recommends, for anyone who wants to go further in (or out?), *A History of Reading in the West* ed Cavallo and Chartier published by Polity Press.

This issue we're moving on from the reading of bound and screen-displayed texts and we're considering the reading of situations – to thinking about how and where learning and teaching take place.

I'm grateful to Kate Pahl (Sheffield University, UK) for having available on her website the text of a talk she gave at the BAAL 2003 SIG Colloquium: 'Linguistic Ethnography at the Interface with Education'. Her first book, *Transformations* (1999), about young children's literacy is fascinating, and I've included examples from it in talks when trying to underline the point that learners don't necessarily learn what or how teachers intend or design. Reading her 2003 talk in a certain way is the topic of this column. It's not intensive or extensive reading (as discussed in the last issue), but *connective* reading. She went to the Colloquium to present a connection or link between ethnography and pedagogy. I'm now suggesting that this link can be seen as relevant to this column's readers' concerns of independence and language learning.

The paper is called 'Challenging family literacy pedagogy through linguistic ethnography'. Before I begin wilfully misreading the text, I should quote its Introduction more or less in full.

In this paper, I want to compare two different contexts for examining and describing data. One is a context in which I was the teacher, in a family literacy class. The other is in the home of one of the families, who attended the class as part of a two-year ethnographic study of literacy

practices in homes. What interests me when returning to these small examples of data is how the context in which the data was gathered shifts the interpretative understanding I brought to the texts. Without the detailed ethnography in the home, I was unable to understand and interpret the texts produced in the context of the family literacy class. In this paper, I look at excerpts from taped interviews and from fieldnotes, as well as drawings and photographs. In this paper, I define linguistic ethnography as ethnographically grounded detailed analysis of communicative practices.

She goes on to describe and explain how she gathered the data, focusing, for the paper, on a five-year-old Turkish boy and his mother, living in London. I think we can pull out or connect four points in a reading of the text designed to fit in with our interests.

The first point is just the fact of data collection. Kate Pahl describes the gathering of drawings, tape recordings, notes and so on. You don't have to be a researching academic in a department of a university to do this. But it's scary how much teaching is going on around the world that's dominated by a set syllabus, a coursebook, the assumptions and content of blended learning materials and so on. I say dominated to indicate the situation where the learners are subjected to (objectified) bulk assumptions about their needs and abilities without any checking of this against what they do or say.

Teachers, lecturers, self-access advisors, whatever the role is, are in a position to question this, check this. Gather your own data; try to get at what is actually happening in the learners you work with. As Kate Pahl collected her data, she was thinking about and re-thinking what it meant. The little boy was interested in birds, including chickens, and he drew them and talked about them. As she investigated, she began to understand how chickens represented his home country – because they could be found at his grandparents' home – and other birds linked to ideas of festivals such as Easter, which meant simultaneously Turkey and the UK – because of the way they were celebrated.

A commitment to the idea of independent language learning should mean a deep respect for the way learners are seeing words, meanings, structures, learning processes, and so on. Their behaviour should

be moulding the design of the resource centres they use.

Secondly, there is an interesting point about role and setting.

I also acknowledge how I placed myself within the two settings [the literacy class and the home]. While in the family literacy context, I was 'teacher', in the home, as an ethnographic researcher, I had a more ambiguous status as 'friend' and 'researcher'. I found this field status complex and challenging.... I was aware that as I participated within the field work, there was a constant tension between my role as 'friend' and my role as researcher. Conversely in the family literacy class, there was an ambiguity in my role as 'teacher' and as potential researcher, as I used the family literacy site as a space in which to recruit families for the longer study.

Without wanting to promote navel-gazing (as a substitute for real work), I think educators do need to reflect carefully on their roles, and on the impact of these roles. How far does authority get in the way of empathy? Does it cloud comprehension? This is the territory of Paulo Freire, of course (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*). In some educational settings, the aim of assisting independent learning may be deemed inappropriate – either because it's seen as subversive or because it's seen as culturally post-imperialist, etc.

And there's always that original challenge: never ask a false question in a class – in other words, never ask a learner a question in class just because you want to demonstrate a language point. Very logical; and very hard to achieve.

Thirdly, the detailed understanding Kate Pahl was able to build about the boy's meaning system with birds depended on her crossover role. She attended the group literacy classes, but she also visited the boy's home, and she collected different kinds of data.

There are further depths or resonances to this approach. It enables encounters with the learner as an individual, and also as, in this case for example, a foreigner, and as a family member, and as a member of a cultural group, and so on.

There's quite a bit of attention at the moment being paid to the idea of intercultural communication

and language learning – the current (March 2008) *EL Gazette* has an article by Barry Tomalin about teaching 'intercultural awareness', 'the fifth skill' – but the point here is that the learner himself or herself is an intercultural identity, existing between cultures, merging rules and expectations to and from and around cultures. And here I mean in the ways that a learner is situated as an outsider of the learnt/proficient community, and so is trying to develop a new or additional identity as a member of it. So a Mexican teenager learning English in Mexico with other Mexican teenagers and a Mexican English teacher is in an intercultural role. Learners learn through multiple modalities and we should try to engage with more than one of them.

Fourth is Kate Pahl's own choice of main point from this, and that's the issue of timescale.

The data I interpreted at home was part of a mass of data collected over two years, whereas the data collected in the family literacy class was collected in the timescale of the course, twelve weeks. One of the key differences, I would argue, between research in classrooms and research in homes, is the difference of timescales.... The timescale of the family literacy class was contained by the demands of the term, and the specific twelve-week course within a term.

This seems to be the heart of the matter. 'I think the issue of timescales is key.' The point is 'that schools have particular timescales, which can be placed in contrast to other timescales.' In fact, the school year, being organised around political, religious and social constraints, 'does not allow for the complex accretion of meaning that [the boy's] meaning making over time showed.'

So there we have it, just as people like Adrian Mitchell have been maintaining for years: school isn't always the best place for learning.

But we believe we have to have schools, for a number of reasons, so we need to forge really effective observations of learners and crossover roles for educators to reflect the complexity and multimodality of learning. We need to support independent learning so that learners are able to cope with the institutional process of instruction properly



Russell Whitehead has been a teacher and self-access co-ordinator and now writes books, CD-ROMs and on-line materials and tests. His new website is now live at:

www.russell.whitehead.com

