

# CONSIDERATIONS, COMPLICATIONS AND CONSEQUENCES OF PRACTITIONER INQUIRY

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Many qualitative research studies, and case studies in particular, necessarily involve close relationships between researcher and subject. Our paper will explore the methodological and ethical considerations, complications and consequences relative to such relationships. Problems can arise concerning who holds the power, who controls the direction of the research, and the obligations of the researcher and the subject to each other. The intimacy involved in this research may seem even stranger to teachers than to people in other professions, since teachers are usually isolated in their classrooms with no one watching over them other than their students. In the first study this paper will explore, a veteran teacher, Pat, accustomed to being the only teacher in the domain of her classroom, suddenly had another teacher, Sharon, sitting in all her classes, taking notes on her style, philosophy and relationship with her students.

Similarly, a writing center consultant usually has some privacy as she does her work; not often is the interaction available for scrutiny by observers. But because Lynn was studying a writer-consultant relationship in which she was the consultant, the privacy for both her and her client had to be forsaken. We will present

our stories to you as a series of voices, representing different stages and aspects of our inquiry. Sharon's "researcher voice" and Pat's "participant voice" are presented first as a sort of dialogue; Lynn's perspective as both a researcher and primary participant in a related study follows.

## CONSIDERATIONS

### *Sharon: Researcher Perspective*

Before I began my study which eventually became titled "College Writing Teachers as Reflective Practitioners," I had taken courses in qualitative research methods, where I learned that a researcher should remain as unobtrusive as possible and that a researcher should establish and maintain rapport with her participants. Only when I started my study did I realize how difficult it was going to be to do both these things simultaneously. I knew I wanted to be in the best spot possible along the participant-observer continuum. I didn't want to be the sterile observer in the lab coat, but we had been warned in our course about the dangers of "going native." I told Pat, the subject of my case study, that I would like to take on the role of a student, completing her in-class assignments, doing whatever the other students did, while remaining as unobtrusive as possible. I didn't want to interfere with or influence her teaching; in no way did I want a chunk of the teacher's desk. I simply wanted to observe and learn about how she thought about teaching writing. But questions and issues and worries were with me from the beginning. What would be the benefits and the costs for the subject and for the researcher? What effect would the collaboration have on students? How would the research affect the dynamics of classroom interaction?

### *Pat: Participant Perspective*

"What are you? Crazy?" That question from a colleague sent me back to the early sixties as I tried to explain to my college roommate why I was involving myself in a program of psychotherapy. "I'd never do that," she said, "because there's no telling what will happen. You'll be so vulnerable." Now, here it was some twenty years later, and a colleague was uttering much the same sentiment as my old roommate, this time, however, because I had engaged myself in a program of regular classroom observation by some stranger. I was to be confronted by this same

attitude many times during the next few weeks and months. And actually, perhaps I was just a little crazy to allow someone into my life and my classroom for the next semester.

As for considerations, there were none on my part. I was completely confident, even closed-minded about my teaching. As long as she didn't make rude noises or obscene gestures, I wasn't going to concern myself with the researcher in the back of the room.

## COMPLICATIONS

Sharon

My plans to remain unobtrusive lasted for about three days. At first, Pat virtually ignored me while I sat in the back of the room. But it didn't take students long to notice that I wasn't being called on to contribute to discussions and that my name wasn't called during roll call. I began getting quizzical looks. In one class, Pat asked students to remove their right shoes and place them in a pile on her desk. She picked them up individually and commented on them. When she picked mine up, she said, "Now who belongs to this *conservative* shoe?" When I raised my hand, she said, "Oh, well, you're a real person." She explained to the class, "Well, you're real too, but she's different."

Different. Just what I was trying *not* to be. My efforts to blend in were obviously not working. Throughout the year, I experienced conflict over my role in Pat's classroom. While I was there primarily as a researcher, I found I could not escape my roles of student, teacher and colleague. I found myself asking often, "Which desk is mine?"

One of my worries was that if I said too much to Pat, I would affect what went on in her classroom, or that I might change her. This worry, I think, was well founded. When Pat complained to me one day that her students' journals sounded like diary entries, I wrote down for her some of the strategies I used to help my students who had the same problem. In her next class that same day, she gave my suggestions to her students. Another time Pat was agonizing over how best to form groups for collaborative work and for peer critique sessions. She had asked the students to write out their preferences for partners; she had been juggling the groups so that there would be a mix of strong and weaker writers; she had consulted with a professional in group dynamics. Still, she

wasn't satisfied with the groups as they stood. She asked how I formed groups, and I responded, "Sometimes I just tell them to get in groups of three." Pat laughed at this, but later that day said to me, "I've decided to just tell them to get into groups of three." I resolved to be even more careful about not suggesting anything to her.

However, in my efforts not to say anything that might change what she did or said, I found myself in situations where I was not acting naturally. As a colleague, which I was, I would normally have told her about activities or methods I was seeing that I particularly liked (and there were many). But because I was "the researcher," I refrained from giving positive as well as negative feedback. If Pat felt that an activity had failed, but I had seen students reacting positively, I didn't say so. One day Pat told me that another teacher had asked her what she would do if my write-up on her turned out to be bad. She said, "I told her, 'Then it will probably be true! If it's bad, it's bad; I'm not going to worry about it.'" I wanted to assure her that what I had written so far would certainly not cause readers to see her in a bad light and that would have been a perfectly true as well as a normal response in the conversation. Instead, I said nothing. I realized that my silence was not natural and that this unnaturalness on my part could eventually lead to an effect in how Pat talked with me greater than the effect of my responding to her naturally would. So, gradually, I accepted a greater role as colleague, recognizing that my desire to be completely unobtrusive was impossible in this situation.

Another worry I entertained was that I was taking advantage of Pat. It is true that she freely volunteered to allow me into her classroom, but she had no idea how hard it would be to escape my presence. I attended almost every class, I talked with her between and after classes, I interviewed her in her office. While we knew each other only casually before the start of the semester, we were close friends within months. Pat would not have it otherwise. There were monthly meetings of writing teachers that were held at night. I attended, even though I wasn't a member of that group, in order to record what Pat said and to observe her with her fellow teachers. As we walked into one of these meetings, Pat hummed "Me and my Shadow," and everyone nodded and laughed. She made jokes about not being able to cough without my recording it and about being followed into the Women's Room.

Although she never complained, it was obvious that my presence was making a difference in her life. I picked her up at her home and drove her to school for these meetings, and as she talked, I was aware of trying to *memorize* what she was saying so that I could write it down as soon as I got home. There was no escape from this researcher, in or out of the classroom. While Pat felt we had a nice friendship, I felt as if I were using her constantly. In the end, I had to accept this also; we did *not* have a normal friendship, and would not have one for as long as the research was going on.

Leaving the field was difficult for me. I had intended to go to some of Pat's classes second semester, but after a few visits I realized that my data collection with her had reached a saturation point and that I could better spend my time visiting additional classrooms and talking with other teachers. I wrote in an analytic memo at the time that the experience was like breaking up with a boyfriend. Each time I met Pat in passing, I would feel guilty for not being there with her, and almost wanted to avoid her because I felt I had abandoned her. Fortunately, she was understanding and felt no resentment, so we soon resumed a more normal relationship in which I was her "ex-researcher" and her current friend and colleague.

The amount and kind of participant observation I did in Pat's classroom were to a large extent determined by her. Soon after classes started, she began using me to help individuals who had missed classes or small groups who needed extra help. She once asked, "Would it be manipulating if I put you in a certain group?" She didn't want to disturb my research, but she did want to take advantage of the presence of another teacher in the room.

Although I preferred to downplay my identity as a teacher, because I didn't want the students to view me as one, this was not always possible. Pat gradually brought me into actual teaching situations more and more. Once a student asked her a question, which she answered. Then she turned to me and asked, "Is that right?" I called back, "I'm only the researcher in the back of the room," but that was becoming increasingly less true. Pat called me to the front of the room one day to model a technique with her. She regularly sent students to confer with me about their drafts.

I believe I watched as Pat developed into an enriched teacher. I also saw her become a fellow researcher as well as the primary subject in my study. One day she burst into my office shouting,

"I've got data for you!" and handed me a summary of conversations she had had with students in her office. Another day she entered her classroom, where the students and I were quietly writing in journals, walked over to my desk and said:

"We've got to talk. We've got to figure out why I don't feel threatened by you. At least a half dozen teachers told me last night (after a meeting) that I shouldn't like being followed around by you, that I should be nervous."

In January, I set up an appointment for an interview with Pat, but *she* set the agenda. "I could tell you about the changes I'm making for this semester based on my experiences last semester." I was no longer working on just *my* dissertation; it had become *our* research.

*Pat*

The confusions and insecurities that had forced me into therapy years before were now forcing me to take some drastic steps toward structuring a philosophy of teaching writing that could encompass my beloved old "product" orientation with the current vogue—PROCESS. Ahh, yes, I had been to this place before. Immediately following graduation, within hours of the celebration, I had been overwhelmed by questions. What now? Should I get a job? Get married? Write? Get a Master's? Teach? Arrange flowers?

Enter Dr. George F. Doyle, therapist. Over the next five years, I regularly retreated to the warmly secure confines of Dr. Doyle's office to sort out my insecurities and to establish control of my life. I emerged from those years with a sense of perspective and insight that would help me solve a variety of problems later on in life. Now, here it was, 1986, and I was facing a semester of change and questions that called for drastic restructuring of what I had always done in the classroom.

By the third week of school, I was into my third syllabus and absolutely flooded with insecurities. The one syllabus that finally developed was the "Loosey-Goosey Assignment Schedule: A Completely Negotiable Syllabus." Questions assailed me on every side. Should I approach this process thing in a more leisurely fashion? Jump right in? Should I read more about process? What was wrong with product anyway? Didn't that old prescriptive method produce writers? Or were they just imitators? And what's so bad about imitation? Should assignments be more specific?

Would peer groups really work? Who would be in charge? Should I be arranging flowers instead of teaching?

Enter Sharon Kane. True, she was supposed to be an objective student-teacher-observer-researcher in the classroom, but she emerged as my academic therapist. Unlike the relationship with Dr. Doyle, there was nothing warm, safe, or secure about the sessions with Dr. Kane. Our sessions were born from the day-to-day desperation that came from trying to teach three distinctly different writing classes. Our sessions were seven-minute snatches of conversation conducted in the raw Syracuse weather as we crossed Waverly Avenue to and from classes. It wasn't until well into the second semester that I realized that our conversations were one-sided affairs, and I was the only one talking, sort of like the sound of one hand clapping.

Let me stop and explain what was happening in my semester. I was teaching three sections of writing, none of them the same. One was a Special Section Freshman English, designed for basic writers, complete with a grammar workbook and a formula for successfully producing a five-paragraph theme. The second was an experimental studio writing course, also Freshman English, which would emphasize the writing process while allowing students control of their own and their peers' texts. Finally, I taught Expository Writing to juniors and seniors, where I planned to use a combination of the other two approaches. My idea of teaching three different classes and using three distinctly different philosophies was utterly insane and reaped general chaos for me as a teacher. Within six weeks, everyone was doing some variation of what someone else was doing in one of the other classes. I wasn't teaching the same lessons (I don't think), but the papers and processes began to exhibit a great deal of sameness.

While Sharon was struggling with all those ethical and professional questions, I was just struggling. As I became aware of what I perceived as failure in the classroom, I also became aware of the primary concern associated with this project: vulnerability. Vulnerability was the name of the game as Sharon recorded it all! She recorded my worst days—the fable fiasco where, armed with the best intentions of Ponsot and Deen, I tried a fable writing exercise in class. The most disastrous result of allowing the students to choose the animals they wanted to be was a match-up between a young lady who wanted to use a stegasaurus and a young man who selected a goldfish; obviously, there wasn't much possibility

for fable-like conversation or moral in that combination. It was awful!

And she recorded my floundering days. Once, for a full three minutes the students and I had sat in the circle looking at each other, waiting for someone to emerge as leader of the group. A colleague in the writing program had mentioned that she exercised patience, having waited a full eight minutes once for her class to respond in a group situation. Not as patient as she, I was ready to clean out my purse or file my nails a minute and a half into that time. And Sharon wrote it down.

And my fast days—one day I took my son's hyperactivity medicine instead of my calcium tablet. Let me just brief you: the medication has a reverse effect on adults. I had already had half a pot of coffee when I discovered my error. "No problem," I thought, "I'll handle it with a positive mind set. . . ." But I knew I was in trouble when I looked back only ten minutes into the class and saw my observer-researcher-therapist writing so furiously that she had run out of paper and was borrowing from those around her. The poor students, immobilized by the speed with which I was speaking, their eyes glazed over, just kept passing paper to Sharon. (In all fairness, I must say that she recorded my good days, too, although I didn't recognize them until some months later when I read a draft of her study.)

Because Sharon was filling reams of paper with notes and because she had read so extensively during her course work, I assumed that she must have answers to the confusions and questions I was facing daily, even hourly. Some days I could hardly wait for our seven-minute sessions crossing Waverly. My blurts, babbles, and badgering for answers, however, were invariably met with some variation of "Oh?" or "I don't know, Pat, what do you think?" It was absolutely exasperating! She must have known the answers. Someone must have known some answers.

## CONSEQUENCES

*Sharon*

One of the consequences of working through the situations that arose during my participant observation was that I was able to use my context to think about other studies that I had read, and they in turn offered me solutions, or at least comfort, in my own role. For example, I realized that other researchers have played



an active role in the lives of their subjects. Sondra Perl and Nancy Wilson (1986) actually lived with their subjects during the time of the research that led to their book, *Through Teachers' Eyes: Portraits of Writing Teachers at Work*. They and the teachers exchanged journals regularly and discussed feelings and reactions. Langer and Applebee (1987) report in *How Writing Shapes Thinking: A Study of Teaching and Learning* that they studied content area teachers who were incorporating strategies learned from the research team that was observing them. So why was I so worried about contaminating my data? Little by little, I was learning to accept the ambiguity and flexibility that are a necessary part of teacher research.

And so, by the end of the case study, I had resolved many of the conflicts I had felt, and learned to live with others. I no longer agonized over such questions as "If I bring Pat a cup of coffee, will the students refuse to accept me?," "If I discuss a student with Pat, does that make me a spy?," and "If I join in a discussion, am I being obtrusive?" I had found my special niche, my own "desk" which was neither a teacher's nor a student's, but which fit.

#### *Pat*

Sharon gave me no answers—neither did Dr. Doyle back in the sixties. What she did give me was a sounding board, and in that capacity she enabled the development of perspective. Her "Oh?" often forced me to look at what was going on in the classroom from several desks. The observer in the classroom was an important addition for me because she acted as a vehicle for implementing change. It was no longer enough to see a whole class in light of a whole semester; I needed to develop insight into the working of individual students' composing processes.

As a teacher, naturally I reflect on what's happening in the classroom, but there was an amplified dimension in articulating that reflection to someone—my observer-researcher-therapist—whether it was good or bad. I guess what I'm trying to say is that the sounding board function aided in eliminating those elements which were not worthwhile in teaching writing. From my view, the presence of the researcher in the classroom did not alter the basic objectives of the subjects, students or teacher. I was there to facilitate learning to write, regardless of what the lady with the portable desk was doing. And the students were there to learn

to write well enough to get through the course with at least a C. I was not shaken in my objective, nor were the students shaken in theirs.

My semester was a time of relinquishing, not because of the researcher, but because that's just where I found myself in that year of transition. I relinquished my grading system, my structured syllabus, my grammar lessons, my authority over texts, my vocabulary lists, my desk—in short, all the things that made me a teacher, I thought. Despite the relinquishing, though, some things have remained constant. I am still just as committed to teaching as any doctor is to medicine or any preacher to his mission field. And I am still of the opinion that the pen is mightier than the sword, and my job is to distribute pens. Finally, I still love everything about language from the most useless comma to Faulkner's most convoluted sentences.

As for my colleague's concern that I might change, I did. Not from an absolute product teacher to a perfectly positive process teacher, but to an *enriched* teacher. For now, I think there's more than ample room for both approaches as long as there is balance, a balance stemming from a concern for the intellectual needs and development of the individual student.

I may still be a little crazy, but I'm not as confused as I was in September of 1986, thanks to the non-efforts of the teacher-observer-researcher therapist in the classroom.

### **LYNN: RESEARCHER AND PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE CONSIDERATIONS**

Unlike the situation with Sharon and Pat, I didn't have two separate people as practitioner and researcher; I was both, and I recognized both of those roles. My research involved a case study exploration of a long-term writer-consultant relationship in a university writing center. During the course of this relationship the writer and consultant worked on a single book-length manuscript. In the study, I functioned as both researcher and consultant.

I didn't see any particular problems with that; after all, practitioner research was "in." It was called for by people such as Dixie Goswami and Peter Stillman, and Donald Schon. I saw the practitioner and researcher roles as discrete and distinct—as things that could happen simultaneously and yet not interfere with each other. I planned to be the best consultant I could be, helping the writer

to become reflective, and confident, and aware of her rhetorical decisions. I planned to be the best possible researcher, too, remaining unobtrusive and not contaminating the data, yet gathering as much information as possible. I thought it was possible to be both at once—not one and then the other, not any less one than the other.

Originally, I did not consider it necessary to prioritize my roles of consultant and researcher. However, after only two weeks of interaction, it became clear in my mind that I needed to consider, to plan, to prioritize, because, unlike I had imagined at first, it was not possible to play the two roles simultaneously. This is how I decided to prioritize:

—I must, I felt, be a consultant first. That was, after all, what I was publicly billing myself as. It was what the writer had contracted with me to be. And, finally, it was what I wanted data on.

—Being a researcher was, therefore, my second priority. I had to be a researcher to do my study, to find out and eventually improve what was going on in the writing center, and to be a professional. But planning and prioritizing didn't clear things up completely. I still had to deal with conflict and doubt.

### *Complications*

Yes, I had planned on being the perfect consultant and researcher at the same time with no problems. Soon after I took on these multiple roles I discovered how silly these plans had been. I began to feel tension—real tension—like I was being pulled apart as I worked with this writer. I'll give an example of one of the things that made me feel torn because of my split personality.

One day, the writer in the relationship came into the writing center, obviously upset. She told me that her writing was going nowhere because her life was so chaotic. Her husband's cancer was out of remission; he had vomited twenty-one times the night before from the chemotherapy. So, she said, just when she was starting to feel good about her writing, she had to stop.

I was torn; I didn't know how to respond. I felt the schizophrenia setting in: I had three roles to choose from: the writing consultant, the researcher, and, now that she had confided in me, the friend. The writing consultant wanted to get back to the writing—to start talking about how the writer could get her writing back on track, or how she might use this time to revise, or how sometimes a layoff from writing can be helpful.

The researcher in me wanted to push her chair back and observe. The researcher wanted to know how, if left alone, this writer would make sense of the layoff in her writing and how she would move with regard to the session.

The friend in me wanted to hold her hand, to ask her about her husband, to tell her that things would get better, to help her look at what she had already accomplished, and to assure her that she would soon have the opportunity, the strength and the inspiration to write again.

This type of complication occurred over and over. Sometimes when conflict arose, I recognized it in an intellectual way—as a test of the boundaries of my roles and the priorities I had set. From my behavior, it seemed that my priorities were in a constant state of flux.

One such situation occurred when the writer and I discussed the possibility of going to lunch together. It really was a reasonable idea. We met at lunchtime, and I know I was sometimes too hungry to be a particularly effective consultant. However, while the suggestion made a good deal of sense, I felt a great deal of resistance, and thought that I “couldn’t do that.”

Why couldn’t I? I believe that it was the researcher that held me back. I had, after all, had writing center sessions outside of the physical center before (yes, in restaurants, or in classrooms, or even at my dining room table). I think that I was held back by my fear of “going native,” of getting too close, being too natural in the research situation. My reaction told me that I privileged the research situation and prerogative. In this case I seemed to give them priority over my effectiveness as a consultant or my desire to be a friend.

I found myself at another boundary when the writer, a researcher herself, asked me what I was finding. Since she had done a great deal of research, I didn’t think she would accept the answer I wanted to give, which was that I didn’t know what I was finding. I was worried about saying anything, fearing that if I made any of my theories apparent, it would influence our interaction and therefore my future data; fearing that if I said anything negative, it would hurt our rapport. But, as a consultant, I was afraid not to tell her, for I interpreted her question not so much as an attempt to get the information out of me, but as an attempt on her part to be a consultant herself.

I had to rethink my priorities. If I wanted to help her with her writing, I needed to encourage her consultant-like behavior, for I believed that that kind of thinking was what could help her the most with her text. I had, after all, been working to get her to distance herself from the text, to try to read it like a consultant. Now she seemed to want to practice her consulting techniques on me. The researcher and consultant were conflicting in me again. The researcher said, "Don't talk about it; it will contaminate the data." The consultant said, "Talk about it; it will help her write."

I ended up giving priority to the consultant role, telling her about my research writing.

### *Consequences*

We teachers as a breed are concerned with solving problems, with finding solutions that make situations less awkward, cumbersome, uncomfortable, ambiguous. Personally, I always try to fix things. Initially I responded to the complications of the practice/research situation by clarifying my priorities; later I took some more pointed steps.

My first move was to allow the tape recorder to be the researcher. I tried to empty my mind of researcher-type thoughts and concentrate only on being the consultant. I had to resist the temptation to make a research note during the session. I tried to act as if I were only a subject in a study, being observed by a mechanical third party.

My second step was to allow time between the sessions and their transcription and analysis in order to keep the data from influencing my consulting relationship. I hoped that distance would allow me to look at the sessions as if I were not the subject. In a very real sense, it wasn't me any more; I had changed substantively by the time I went back to the data.

Finally, I used data collected by other consultants as a foil, as a check on what I was observing.

But these solutions didn't make the day-to-day dilemmas go away. What was called for was a change in attitude. I had come to realize that to do something as complex as practitioner inquiry I had to live with some problems—some awkward, uncomfortable, ambiguous situations—some recurrent worries, some haunting doubts that I was somehow causing harm by giving ground in one of my roles. I have finally come to realize that the tension be-

tween roles is necessary, even desirable, for it informs both roles. I guess my message, *our* message, here is that if you want to do practitioner research, expecting and accepting uncomfortable compromise and constant ambiguity will make it easier, and in the end, more rewarding.

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