

Collaborative Classroom Inquiry

When we visit one another's classrooms, we do so not to produce an official evaluative account of an individual teacher's "performance," but to represent for one another our classrooms as texts that we can read critically, with the aim of better understanding what is happening and why (135).

Putting this belief into practice [that teachers are never done learning] necessarily changes how we work with students and with other teachers by presenting learning (and teaching) as an ongoing enterprise that requires *collective* reflection...(135).

—Amy Lee, *Composing Critical Pedagogies*

This journal activity builds on the work you did a few weeks ago attending to a graduate seminar classroom and reflecting on how the on-going intellectual work of that classroom is facilitated by teachers and students, and by the work of reading, talking, writing and thinking. I want to reiterate what Lee says above and what Joy Ritchie has written (about observation) in the materials that are included in your TA Orientation Packet: The point of this activity is not to evaluate/assess teacher performance (your own or someone else's). Rather, we are gathering information about, and reflecting on, specific moments in classrooms as a means of research.

What are we researching? Each pair/group will have identified its own research question(s)/agenda. It may center on the work of teaching (want to know more about class discussion, facilitating critical reading, etc.). It may develop from course readings or theoretical orientations (Ex. Lee's insistence on teaching/learning as context-specific interests us. We want to explore how our 150 classrooms represent different contexts for learning.) For this activity, you'll work in self-selected groups of two or three. Here are what I see as the important steps in this activity.

(1) Some in-class (957) writing to brainstorm issues/concerns/interests regarding our 150 classrooms and some ways in which those issues/concerns/interests are observable. You should be ready to share from this list, though you won't need to make this list fully public.

(2) Develop, collaboratively, some questions that will guide your observations in ways that will allow both/all of you to explore the issues, concerns or interests that prompted your work together. This sounds straightforward, but it is challenging. Draw on your work as a teacher/writer/researcher in which you (have helped students to) identify "good questions"—questions that are generative. (Be sure to devote some time together to this task.)

Issues to consider as you develop these questions:

- Does this (set of) question(s) identify a specific, observable phenomenon? Ex. Do students seem responsive to the teacher's attempts today to prompt engagement with

reading critically (attending both to discussion and in-class writing activity)? (vs. What is the place of reading in this class?)

- Have we framed an issue (or set of questions) that can be addressed in the period of a few class meetings? Ex. What are students in today's peer response groups saying to their classmates' about their writing? (vs. How does this course teach students to talk about writing?)
- Do I see connections between the observable phenomena these questions direct me to AND the issue(s)/question(s) we're trying to address? There are lots of things we can observe/measure in a classroom that don't tell us very much. We could, for example, keep a running tally of how many students spoke during class. But what would such a tally tell us about discussion or student learning? Or we could count how many times the teacher talks—but, as many of you noted in your observations of a grad. seminar, it seems uncritical to assume that any and all teacher talk is suspect.

(3) Decide on the process for observing (including dates for class visits). As you're discussing dates, you should have a copy (or copies) of your syllabus with you (to leave with your partner(s)) and you should pay attention to which dates (on your syllabus) provide the best opportunities for gathering information on the group's topic. You should also discuss how you will introduce each other to your classes. My recommendation is to keep the introductions simple: "This is X. She's here as part of an informal teacher-research project that we're doing together on "y." She may join your small group" (if, in fact, that's what you decided as a group).

(4) As a group, collaboratively author a journal response of at least 4 pages (but can go longer) in which you:

- Describe the interests/concerns in the project you undertook.
- Draw on your observation/notes to describe those classroom moments that felt most relevant to the interests/concerns you took up. (While it is not necessary to identify whose classrooms are described, I would like you to make an effort to include scenes from each group members' classroom).
- Reflect collectively on the meaning(s) you can make of those observations (referring, where useful, to course readings or class discussions from 957).

What knowledge about the issue/concern at hand AND/OR about the teaching of writing (more generally) can you make together (or speculate toward) on the basis of observing each others' classrooms?

(5) Each of you should write a separate one-page reflection on your experience of this assignment. (Issues you might address: reflections on the process of collaborative work/knowledge making; reflections on sharing your classroom with peers; etc.).

Due Sept. 27: A 4-page collaborative write-up for each group & a separate individual reflection from each student.