

## **ESOL Rounds: An Inquiry Approach to Preparing Qualified and Culturally Competent Teachers for South Carolina's Classrooms**

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*A Bantu student recently transferred into my 7th grade classroom and she really doesn't do anything during class. Mostly she just sits around not participating in anything. At first there was one student who would try and make sure she had the work she needed but that only lasted a little while and then the Bantu student was back to basically just sleeping in class. (Pre-service teacher journal entry)*

*When they were in their regular classroom it was very hard to pick out that they were ESOL students. When the two girls spoke they had a very light accent; from what I could tell in the classroom and they also were very chatty and 'good with their words.' (Pre-service teacher journal entry)*

Early adolescence is a time of transition for all young people, and these transitions may be especially difficult for immigrant and refugee students who are learning a new language and culture (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Such children are learning to speak and read the English language while they are simultaneously expected to learn social studies, math, and science content and perform on required state assessments. Each of the middle school students described in the journal entries above was an English language learner (ELL). The writer of the first entry described a student who appeared to be disengaged or disinterested in school. The writer of the second entry described two students who appeared to blend in well with the other students in their class and to have a mastery of English. In both cases the real needs of the students could easily have gone unnoticed by their teachers; the students were at risk of slipping through the cracks.

The population of South Carolina is growing increasingly diverse in terms of culture and language. The Hispanic population of the state more than doubled during the 1990s, and in ethnic corridors of cities like Columbia, Charleston, and Greenville signs and storefronts boldly proclaim the diversity of the population. These are places where Korean, Latino, West African, and Chinese voices proudly announce, "We are here, we are home, and we are staying." The clear implication for teacher educators in South Carolina is that pre-service teacher candidates need to be prepared to teach children who are ELLs. We need to think carefully about the kinds of instructional decisions they will need to make and, more importantly, the principles that will guide those decisions.

In the fall of 2004, I developed an inquiry project to help better prepare a group of interns for their work with ELLs. I combined a "rounds" approach (Del Prete, 1997; Thompson & Cooner, 2001) with ethnographic observation (Frank, 1999) to help them see beneath the surface of school life and to better understand the kinds of multilayered transitions that middle level ELLs navigate on a daily basis. I believed that such an understanding might strengthen their commitment to social justice in the classroom,

stimulate thought about effective and appropriate strategies for teaching ELLs in social studies classes, and provide a basis for bridging the cultural and linguistic differences they will likely encounter throughout their teaching careers (Virtue, forthcoming). I repeated the project in 2005 with six pre-service teachers enrolled in my social studies methods course. In this article I describe the project, discuss issues in its planning and implementation, and share lessons learned along the way.

### **Rounds**

The idea for ‘rounds’ is based on the teaching model used in training hospitals whereby an intern works closely with a teaching physician as they visit patients and discuss their conditions and treatments on a case-by-case basis. This model has been adapted for use in pre-service and in-service teacher education (Del Prete, 1997; Powell & Napoliello, 2005; Thompson & Cooner, 2001), and it has been implemented successfully at the University of South Carolina in our teacher education programs (Zenger, 2003).

Del Prete (1997) identified three components of a rounds approach to teacher education – orientation, observation, and reflection. The rounds group first has an orientation to a classroom activity or instructional strategy that they will observe in the host teacher’s classroom. Next, the group engages in a focused observation of the activity or strategy, or the group members may participate in the activity in some clearly defined way. Finally, the rounds group meets with the host teacher and the university supervisor to reflect upon and discuss the activity or instructional strategy.

The rounds approach offers several key benefits. It provides learning experiences for participants that are embedded in the context of the classroom, and it is these shared classroom experiences that serve as the basis for reflective dialogue (Del Prete, 1997). The model brings together the diverse perspectives of university faculty, pre-service teacher candidates, and practitioners during the reflection process, which is crucial as observers will often see different things and arrive at different interpretations of the phenomena under investigation (Powell & Napoliello, 2005). By helping to bridge gaps between these multiple perspectives, the rounds approach also provides a type of superstructure that allows us to “expand the discussion of best practices across the isolation of (existing) school structures” (Thompson & Cooner, 2001, p. 87).

Rounds typically focus attention on an instructional strategy, learning activity, or classroom management technique. However, my version of the model focused inquiry on interactions between individual students, their teachers, and classroom cultures. The cultural focus for the project meant that an ethnographic perspective had to be integrated throughout. Also, because we were interested in the transitions students make as they move from one milieu to another (e.g., classroom, hallway), my version of rounds involved focused observations of ELLs in multiple settings, including a regular content area classroom and an ESOL classroom.

### **Orientation**

The rounds model begins with an orientation to the observation experience (Del Prete, 1997). Because our observations would focus on cultural phenomena involving ELLs in classroom settings, my goal during this phase was to introduce my interns to the concept of ethnographic observation. Together we read *Body Ritual among the Nacirema*

by Horace Miner (1956), a classic in cultural anthropology. My purpose was twofold: I wanted to provide the class with a model for ethnographic writing, and I wanted to illustrate how an ethnographic perspective brings to light cultural patterns that may be implicit, taken-for-granted, and sometimes invisible. As we read the article, I asked the class to do the following.

- Take note of the writing style. Think about how the author attempts to report his observations in a neutral way.
- Underline any instances in which the author states an opinion or value judgment about the phenomena under observation.
- Underline and note any memos that guide the author's thinking about the Nacirema culture.
- Note any questions you would have for this author.

Next we read a selection from the book *Ethnographic Eyes: A Teacher's Guide to Classroom Observations* in which the author distinguishes between "Note Taking" and "Note Making" (Frank, 1999, pp. 9-14). Note Taking is the process through which an ethnographer records what he/she sees. The observer attempts to create a narrative snapshot of the setting, events, and other classroom phenomena. In contrast, Note Making is the process through which the observer records his/her interpretations of what he/she sees and hears, or writes memos that raise questions about the observation or help to guide the process of thinking about the phenomena being observed.

I asked the interns to practice their observation skills for 10 or 15 minutes in a public place, and to practice "note taking" and "note making" as described in the reading selections from Frank (1999). Because our class met only once a week, I asked the interns to post the notes they "took" and the notes they "made" on our online discussion board, and to respond thoughtfully to each other's observations. This public discussion of the observations was vital, as it gave me an opportunity to assess the interns' emerging understandings of ethnographic observation and to guide or redirect the discussion as needed. It was especially important to show the interns how their biases and value judgments were affecting their "note taking."

The observations were conducted in diverse settings including stores, restaurants, and settings on campus. For example, two interns observed a dining hall on campus and discovered a social space that may mean different things to different people - a place to be seen (or not seen), a place to meet friends, a place to study or get work done, or maybe just a place to grab a quick bite of food.

A key issue to consider during the orientation phase is the extent to which the observation should be structured. Borich (1994) argues that observation is a systematic process that is defined by "the structure the observer brings to the observation" (p. 28). However, too much structure or too narrow a focus may restrict opportunities for discovery and may close doors to inquiry. I chose to provide a loose structure for the observations that included rules and guidelines for the process of conducting an ethnographic observation; specification of the settings and students under investigation; and a rigid timeframe for the observation which was bounded by our regular class meeting time of three hours. I chose not to specify the kinds of behaviors or interactions

to observe, as I wanted each intern to identify salient phenomena from her own perspective.

### **Observation**

The observations took place in a middle school within our university Professional Development Schools (PDS) network. The school was in a district that served students from more than 40 countries, and that recently opened an international welcome center for newcomers at one of its elementary schools. The ESOL teacher identified the students we would observe, and she made arrangements for us to observe them in a content area class for the first period of the day, and an ESOL class during the second period.

The four interns in the 2004 rounds group observed a single social studies class with four ESOL students, and we shadowed them as they went from social studies to a school assembly, then to ESOL class. The six interns in the 2005 rounds group were put in pairs and sent to three different social studies classes for first period. They then followed the students to ESOL class for period two.

The interns and I recorded our observations on a t-chart that had columns for note taking and note making. They were instructed to take descriptive notes in the left column and to address the question, *what do I see?* The right column was for making reflective notes that addressed the question, *what does it mean?*

### **Debriefing/Reflecting**

The day after the 2004 observations the four interns, the ESOL teacher, and I met for a debriefing period at the middle school. The 2005 rounds group engaged in a brief reflective discussion immediately after the observation, and then we continued the discussion online during the days that followed. Several patterns of observations emerged during the debriefing sessions.

The 2004 rounds group learned that there is a big difference between a student who is not saying anything and a student who has nothing to say. They noticed that the ELL students were more relaxed and very talkative in the ESOL class. As one intern noted, "*Students were a bit talkative without any consequence.*" The academic norm of "silent until spoken to" that she observed and experienced in many classrooms did not apply here.

In contrast, the 2005 rounds group thought the ELLs blended easily with their native English speaking peers. It was important to point out to them that some ELLs may speak English well enough that their needs are not easily recognized. It is common for ELLs in the middle grades to achieve conversational fluency in English, but still lack a level of English language proficiency required to learn some academic content (Carrier, 2005).

Both rounds groups saw how the ESOL teacher built community in her classroom. Student work was prominently displayed inside the room, instilling a sense of belonging and ownership for the place, and her teaching approach was highly interactive and collaborative. As one 2005 intern noted:

*She used many activities so that the students had little time to spend off task...her approach was more personal and conversational. The teacher directed the class*

*up front. She didn't lecture though. She gave students many different activities to stay engaged.*

We also witnessed how a sense of community developed spontaneously among the ELL students. For example, when the ESOL teacher asked a boy who arrived the previous day if he had gotten a locker assignment, he replied, “No.”

“Then where do you keep your book bag?” she asked.

“We share a locker,” he said, pointing to the boy at the desk to his right.

### **Conclusion**

This project illustrates how a rounds approach and ethnographic observation may be integrated with pre-service field experiences in order to help interns see beneath the surface of daily life in schools so as to better meet the needs of all students in their classrooms. As one intern in the 2004 group noted, “*(The project) gave me a perspective on education that I did not experience with my assigned internship classroom.*”

Through this experience, my interns and I were able to witness how some middle level ELLs navigate the multilayered transitions that define their daily lives in school. We learned that students who appeared to lack confidence, motivation, and communication skills in a content area classroom might exhibit those qualities and skills in a safe ESOL learning community, and we saw how the ESOL teacher built such a community in her classroom. We also learned that ELL students who demonstrate a high level of English language fluency may have needs for support that are less obvious.

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