

1-1-1998

Understanding Prolepsis through Teacher Research

Phillip White

Phillip_White@ceo.cudenver.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/networks>



Part of the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

White, Phillip (1998) "Understanding Prolepsis through Teacher Research," *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2470-6353.1249>

This Full Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Understanding Prolepsis through Teacher Research

by Phillip White

Phillip White teaches third grade at McElwain Elementary School, Denver, Colorado.

Correspondence: Phillip_White@ceo.cudenver.edu

Most often teacher research is written in a linear narrative form, bringing the reader along the story line of discovery much as the researcher herself made her discoveries. I have chosen a different approach, one I'll label as recursive narrative. This narrative form follows my own thinking processes, reflexive, discursive, moving recursively from present to future to past and back again, attempting to create a circular whole that is evident at the end. This recursive narrative form is reflective of the shape of prolepsis itself, analyzing an activity while taking into account its historical form, its present form, and considering what its future form might look like, in order to decide what to do next. I believe that all teachers view their classroom activities proleptically, but have not made such thinking explicit to themselves. What follows is a recursive description about how I have attempted to make my proleptic thoughts explicit.

I loved teaching with this class. I looked forward to the Wednesday evenings when we would meet. We didn't exactly meet sharply at four, there were always parking problems for the class to face, or a faculty meeting they had to attend, or the unexpected meeting with a parent, a child, another teacher. But by four thirty everyone was seated around ten tables that I had earlier pushed into the shape of a rectangular donut so that we could all sit and see one another. There were twenty-two of us in this master's class, to study teacher inquiry together and for each to come up with a research proposal that would be carried out the following semester. Some were full time teachers, some were teacher candidates still deciding where they would do their final semester of intern teaching. And there was me, the instructor of record, a literacy resource teacher at a local suburban elementary school, a doctoral candidate here at the university.

You may have noticed that I remarked that I was the instructor of record, and also spoke of the members of the class rather than students. This distinction became explicit for me about three or four weeks into the class. Since I had decided to research my own practice within this class, and to make my research an explicit model that everyone could follow and participate in, I found myself unwilling to refer to them as 'students' and to me as the 'teacher'. While yes, I was the instructor of record and as such responsible for recording their grades, it was quickly clear that each one of us was a teacher and that we all were learners. Hence, I saw us all as a classroom of learners.

My weekends were spent reading their journals. Their journals had two functions. The first was for fieldnotes, writing down what they saw and did, how the days in their classrooms unfolded. The second function was for personal reflections, wonderings, and questions about their experiences and interactions with other teachers and public school students, as well as making

connections between what we read and discussed in our class meetings and how it related to their daily experiences. My goal in assigning the journals was to have a common tool to construct our own individual sense of coherence of the learning experience (Clarke, 1996).

I discovered that reading the journals, eight to ten every weekend, could take from ten to fifteen hours. I wrote responses in the margins, at the top and bottom, and sometimes on extra pieces of paper. I read the journals looking for the authentic voice of the writer. Each instance I found I would highlight and remark about, hoping to initiate a dialog. I wanted to identify and honor each learner's voice of reflection. I didn't want them assuming my voice, the voices of the writers we were reading, or the voices of other university instructors. I wanted them to recognize and then strengthen their own voices so that they better understood their own practices, their own beliefs, their own values and theoretical understandings. Underscoring the practice of journal writing, Cooper (1991) asserts "Teachers must constantly integrate their own needs, values, and desires with the often conflicting expectations of society" (p. 109). The more I wrote in response, the more they wrote and the more my weekends were spent happily in front of the wood burning cast iron stove reading their journals.

And then, new voices began to enter the journals. Cranky voices. Impatient voices. Blaming voices. Voices that were disengaged. I was startled. No, I was fearful and irritated. And my first response was to be an angry parent, rebuking and criticizing. I was going to lecture them on how they had gone wrong in appropriating the 'wrong voice'. Of course, I knew that this was the wrong thing to do, my anger would just alienate the rest of the class. I attempted to be more reflexive.

I found the voices easy enough to identify, for often the journal writers placed the voices within quotation marks. The voices were most often other teachers within the schools; voices of cooperating teachers, voices of teachers down the hall, in faculty meetings, at staffings for special education classmates, voices preparing for parent conferences, voices of teachers talking to other teachers in the faculty lounge. I was reading the voices of school culture. Unhappily, these voices were not particularly supportive in allowing my classmates to develop their own authentic voices based on their reflective practices. Instead, these voices marginalized, devalued or ignored the emerging student voices. For example: "Emiliano seems all distracted this week. He's a little sharp with the other kids in the class and he's not bringing back his homework as he usually does. I wonder if there's something going on at home?" remarked one journal writer, Claire, reporting on her concerns to her cooperating teacher. The teacher replied, "You'll find out that the parents in this neighborhood really don't care about academic success. There's not a lot we can do. Besides, he's not that responsible in doing his homework."

Immediately, Claire is in a difficult situation, perhaps even a double bind. She wants to be seen as successful within the eyes of her cooperating teacher. She attempts to create as many common bonds between them as possible. Claire likes her cooperating teacher and writes, "She's really nice to the kids. She's never at a loss about what to do next. She's always coming up with these great ideas." Claire doesn't disagree about whether or not the parents don't care. She instead responds with a deferential "Yes." And in her journal Claire wonders how to work with parents who don't care about academic success. Even though both Claire and I know that she believes that parents do value academic success, and that effective teachers recognize that how parents

support academic success will look different for different parents, Claire assumes the negative stance of her cooperating teacher. Furthermore, as Claire moves through the halls of the school she is assigned to, a common mantra that she hears is that the school's neighborhood does not value academic success.

I ponder what Claire has written in her journal. Similar events are being described in other journals. There's a theme here, and I'm uncomfortable with it. I am so uncomfortable, in fact, that at first I say to myself, "We need to have a class discussion. I need to point out to them what's happening." I'm on the verge of giving a lecture. I want to rant. And I know better. I know lectures aren't too effective in supporting reflective practices. Reflective practice as an action is supported by reflective practices. I consider how as a class we can practice reflective practices. I consider again what I am reading in the journals and what this says about the present state of mind of the class, their new and tentative reflective practice, and social relations at their assigned schools. I then remember back to when I was student teaching, my experiences, my relationships with my cooperating teacher, other teachers, classmates, my entire working community. I remember too how I began my first year of teaching, and the cultural beliefs I suddenly found around me. I remember about how I tried to find a place for me and my beliefs and how difficult that was to negotiate. And finally, I began to consider both where I wanted these classmates to be in the future, and where I thought that they wanted themselves to be in the future. I asked myself, "What do they need to know now, based on their immediate past experiences, to support them to become the teachers they want to become?" And I asked myself, "What have I learned about schools, faculties, individual teachers that not only informs my practice now as a teacher, so that I don't become part of the negative culture of school, but also enables me to anticipate how to change it for the better in the future?" I was thinking within a process of prolepsis.

Originally, prolepsis is a term of rhetoric which means that, while one is listening to an opponent's argument, one also anticipates and then answers an objection or argument before one's opponent has put it forth. Michael Cole (1996) describes it as a possible instructional strategy in which the teacher, centered in the present tense of an activity, is both "looking backward, looking forward" (p. 185). Prolepsis is a way of organizing and understanding information by centering on it as a cultural-historical activity which extends a present activity into a future understanding and learning. In understanding the individual history, the present and future of a learner, the teacher is honoring and beholding the totality of the learner, the whole learner. The teacher is attempting to understand the epistemology, the way of knowing, of the learner. A relationship which respects the individual history of the learner is being constructed. Of course, while actively engaged in this way of understanding, the teacher is herself a learner. One result is that both participants are instructing each other within their zones of proximal development.

Prolepsis can also be problematic. As Seth Tuler (1996) points out, "A diverse body of research in, for example social psychology, behavioral decision theory, sociology, conflict management and dispute resolution, organizational behavior, game theory, and sociolinguistics, suggests that an individual's orientations, those particular evaluative stances held towards objects, people, and activities, influence the characteristics of particular dialogic encounters" (p. 8). So that, while on one hand when a teacher utilizes her own knowledge to understand a learner's learning, as well as to anticipate where to instructionally go next, there is always the possibility that multiple

factors, such as the teacher's biases, limited understanding or even misunderstanding will in fact interfere or obstruct that learner's learning. Again, Tuler: "Interlocutor orientations, the dynamics of communicative interactions, sharing and interpretation of information, etc. are connected in mutually constituting, situated relationships" (p. 8). If the mutually shared connections of the classroom relationships are not positive for the learner - and these positive relationships are to a great extent initially constructed by the classroom teacher based on her history and beliefs and values, and how she perceives individual learners - then there will be little success in initiating the learner into the classroom activities that engender academic success.

First Experiences of 'Teacher Inquiry'

But let me move back to the time before my reading of the journals. Let me tell the history of how and why I even began using journals as a tool for self-reflective practices and learning. It all began in January of 1997, when I for the very first time taught the Teacher Inquiry course. This was not only the first time I taught this particular class, Initial Teacher Education 5070, Teacher Inquiry, it was also the first time I taught a university level class. It was not an auspicious beginning. The location of the class had been changed at the last minute, and while I found the classroom on time, about a third of the class was wandering about the campus attempting to find the classroom. I had hoped for a class of about 25, I was expecting a class of 32, and in the end 38 students appeared at various times over the three hours of the first class.

They were cranky and disoriented, having searched through several campus buildings, and their attitude didn't seem to get any better as the weeks went by. To me it looked as if they were interested in what they had to do to get an A. They wanted to know how many pages they were expected to write for each assignment. Every assignment was to be as concrete as possible. I wanted assignments to be as open ended as possible to allow students room to construct their own learning. For the most part they were completing their third residency, that final semester as a teacher candidate, or student teacher as I understood it. They were stressed. They didn't like theory. They wanted methods, so that they would know what to do in the classroom. They were tired. Some held part time jobs. They didn't like grades below an A, and always came to talk to me about any such instances.

Of course, for every story, there's a contradictory story. There were students who wanted to learn about how to do teacher research. They thrived with open ended assignments. They challenged me and asserted their own beliefs. They applied theory to their reflections and understandings of classroom activities, and enjoyed the readings. In short, I experienced some wonderful times with individual students, and some uncomfortable times with individual students.

But on the whole I felt that for most of the class I had not succeeded in constructing with them a meaningful class that directly related to the ebb, flow and undertows of the daily currents of teaching. I had had my syllabus in front of me, assignment after assignment written out for week after week. I kept my eye on the syllabus and the activities that had been planned for before classes had even begun. Following the syllabus, I failed to follow the class. I wasn't a very successful instructor. And the students agreed, I think. Their end of the course evaluations suggested that I had a lot to learn. We were not a community of practice. As an instructor I felt clumsy, uncertain and troubled. I knew I was part of the problem, but I didn't know how to make

specific changes that would make a difference. The discomfort of this teaching experience stayed with me through the summer and I spent much time in the garden weeding dandelions and considering what I would do for the autumn semester.

In early June, the faculty of initial teacher education met to discuss how to bring the portfolio requirement of the program to a greater front and center emphasis. There was agreement that as instructors we would support the students so that the artifacts of their portfolios would directly reflect their teaching, with specific accompanying reflective annotations. As one of the instructors put it, we wanted the students to focus on, "Who am I? What do I do? What do I have that shows who I am and what I do?" I considered what it was that had most helped me in my master's program to answer those three questions, and decided that it was a literacy profile that I had been assigned. In fact, the literacy profile had come out of two of my classes. The first time it was assigned, it was done as a linear description of how I had acquired my literacy in reading and writing as I wandered, often in great distraction, through my life. The second assignment was in a class in which we were studying the relationships between culture and literacy, and we were asked to rewrite our literacy profile from a conscious reflection of our socio-cultural history.

I decided then that, along with a research proposal to be implemented the following semester, I would assign a literacy profile, anticipating that the classmates would learn as much about how literacy and education are multiple cultural constructs, of which classroom literacy is only one aspect. I found comfort too in Carol Witherell's belief in the value of autobiographical narrative as a teaching tool. "There are two central reasons for the rich use of narrative in teaching and counseling. One has to do with the coherence and the ongoing autobiographical activity of the self, the other with the power of story and metaphor in human action and feeling" (1991, p. 92). I also decided to write a syllabus that covered only the first three or four class meetings. After that point I hoped that the class and I would co-construct the remaining syllabus based on our mutual understandings about where the class needed to go next.

So, as soon as I learned that I would be again teaching Teacher Inquiry, I began thinking proleptically. I didn't know this yet, because I hadn't yet read Michael Cole's book *Cultural Psychology* (1996). The reading wouldn't occur for another month. But, the trajectory of that fall course of Teacher Inquiry had been set. And now, as I write this essay after the course has been basically completed and I read the notes from the early June meeting, I can see that the final bit of information that I walked away with from that August meeting was "Pay attention to how the class is becoming a community of practice; follow the learners, not the syllabus."

Just before class first met, thinking about how to follow the learners, I decided to directly research my own teaching practice and to use this as a way of following the learner. Further, following Gordon Wells' (1992, 1994) example, I would make my research explicitly part of my classroom instruction. And finally, I wanted to co-construct with the students a community of practice (Engeström, 1993, p. 67). For although I didn't know the class, I was in fact thinking of them as the archetypal students, based on the last class experience. As it turned out, of course, the class did not fit my perceptions. We all negotiated ourselves through misperception into greater clarity and understanding. As one student commented on the last day of class, "I had no idea when I came into the class that you were the instructor. I saw you sitting at the side and

thought you were a new student I had never met before. I had expected you to be sitting in the front of the class." In fact, the class became for me a wonderful time of learning as well as a time of solid, wonderfully supportive relationships.

Reflecting on Learning

Now my recursive story moves back to when I'm first conscious of Claire's dilemma. I shook off my fear, which in itself alleviated my feelings of anger. Calmer, I considered the problem all weekend and into Monday and Tuesday. By Wednesday I had a slight notion about what I was going to do. I decided on an activity which I hoped would provoke the class to consider the contrasts between their beliefs, and beliefs that they were possibly appropriating while working with other teachers. One of the texts we were using, *Probing Understanding*, by Richard White and Richard Gunstone (1992), featured a teaching strategy called Relational Diagrams (p. 123), which was based on group work. Before anyone got to class, I set up the room so that there were six chairs around each of four large tables. That way, when the class came in they sorted themselves out into four different groups. After the initial class announcements, etc., I began the activity. Each table was given a three feet by three feet sheet of butcher paper. Each member of the group was asked to remember the last time they had learned something, it didn't matter what, and to retell it to the members of the group. After each member had completed a retelling, someone wrote down on the butcher paper all of the attributes that constituted how learning was accomplished. Attributes could be specifics about support, time, space, community, practice time, relationships, etc. This part of the activity took about forty minutes to complete.

Then each group orally reported out to the other groups. I next asked them to identify the common attributes of learning that were found across all four groups. On one half of the dry erase board I wrote down the attributes as they were identified.

Essential Elements for Learning To Occur:

- Risk taking
- Community of learners
- Hands on / experiential
- Intrinsic need to learn
- Perception of relevance
- Dialogue with feedback
- Self-directed
- Positive experience
- Individual needs met
- Background knowledge is there

When all the attributes were accounted for, I asked for statements describing what learning based on these attributes would look like. One example was: "In order for learning to occur, the learner has a need to know, learns through experience, within a community, in which language supports and mediates the learning, so that the learning is situated in a rewarding experience." Other statements followed.

Looking at the statements, I suggested that these were their theories of learning, based on the empirical evidence of their experiences. By now, half of the dry erase board was covered in writing. I drew a line down the middle of the board and asked for examples of teacher talk that they hear in the schools that they are working in. The examples of teacher talk were to be taken from times when teachers talked to other teachers, or when teachers talked to them. The examples of teacher talk were to be those that were embedded within the culture of the school conversation, rather than teaching talk.

A silence held for some time. I wondered if I had phrased the question poorly, or if I were being too vague or if I weren't being understood. A voice tentatively spoke up, "You mean, like, "These kids don't value learning?" I wrote that down. Sentences tumbled forth from nearly everyone. "You can't expect too much from neighborhoods like this." "The parents don't value education." "The parents don't know how to support education." "Stick around teaching long enough and you'll see that what was the answer twenty-five years ago just comes around again." "We're just babysitters, really. These kids don't know how to learn."

Then I asked the question: Where does this culture of the school overlap with your beliefs about the essential elements for learning to occur? It was here that we would construct a Relational Diagram. As I had planned this lesson, it had been my assumption that there would be some over-lapping relationships between the two sets of attributes, those for Essential Learning and those for School Culture. I was in for a surprise.

The class was very quiet for a while, until a student said, "Well, it's obvious. There's no overlapping at all." Others agreed. And then we all sat quietly and pondered the implications. And I thought to myself, "Okay, how do I build on this bit of completed instruction?" For by now, it was also the end of class and students were preparing to leave out into the night. And I was again, proleptically, formulating my future lesson plans. Based on the activity that we had just completed, and based on what I knew from my own past as well as the learners' pasts, and the community of practice we were co-constructing, where did I want to get to next? I continued to think proleptically, planning for next week's class.

Conclusion

Teacher inquiry, action research, teacher research, however you label the activity, is a powerful teaching tool. While of course, journal writing, cooperative groups, Socratic discussions, large group instruction and shared readings - to mention a few of the various teaching strategies I have used - were valuable, in the end the classroom based research provided a coherent whole for the entire semester. The greater value of the classroom research was that I employed the participation of the rest of the class and that the research activity itself was informed by a vision of prolepsis. Through prolepsis I continually sought to understand the history of the individuals of the class, the brief history of the class, as well as my own history, in order to decide on on-going learning activities directly supporting what I understood to be positive future activities of new teachers. The future activities I expected the new teachers to utilize were their own classroom teacher inquiries, informed by reflective practices that included considering their own history, their students' history, always keeping in mind what it was that they wanted in future student practices and how to get there. This is a recursive activity, keeping in mind the past, the

present and the future, and using the practices of teacher research as the on-going tool of documentation that informs future instructional and reflective teaching practices.

On the face of it, such a description of the process seems complicated. Yet, while one is within the process, the flow is natural and effective. However, I cannot stress too strongly the need to make sure that you are gathering all the data at the moment it is there. When I went back to check my field notes on the class time that I described in this essay, I discovered to my chagrin that I had not documented what I had written on the dry erase board. After the class left, I was tired and the next class was coming through the door, along with the instructor. I looked at the board, at all that was written, and thought, "I don't need to write that down. I'll remember." But, I didn't. Happily, when I began writing this essay I was able to contact members of the class and use their class notes for documentation. But, I've learned my lesson. Save as much documentation as possible. It will be valuable in the future.

References

1. Cole, Michael (1996). *Cultural psychology: A once and future discipline*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
2. Cooper, Joanne E. (1991). Telling our own stories: The reading and writing of journals or diaries. In Carol Witherell and Nell Noddings (Eds.), *Stories lives tell: Narrative and dialogue in education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
3. Engeström, Yrjo (1996). Developmental studies of work as a testbench of activity theory: The case of primary care medical practice. In Seth Chaiklin and Jean Lave (Eds.), *Understanding practice: Perspectives on activity and context*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
4. Tuler, Seth Philip (1996). *Meanings, understandings, and interpersonal relationships in environmental policy discourse*. Unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation, Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts.
5. Wells, Gordon and Chang-Wells, Gen Ling (1992). *Constructing knowledge together: Classrooms as centers of inquiry and literacy*. Portsmouth, NH. Heinemann.
6. Wells, Gordon et al. (1994). *Changing schools from within: Creating communities of inquiry*. Toronto: OISE Press; Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
7. White, Richard and Gunstone, Richard (1992). *Probing understanding*. New York: Falmer Press.
8. Witherell, Carol (1991). The self in narrative: A journey into paradox. In Carol Witherell and Nell Noddings (Eds.), *Stories lives tell: Narrative and dialogue in education*. New York: Teachers College Press.