

Research About the Writing Process

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Recently my daughter saw a Quebec auto license with its slogan *Je me souviens*. She wanted to know what it meant. The translation, *I remember*, only raised the further question: What was being remembered? In conjecturing about the likely answer to that one, I realized that that phrase would never have the same richness of meaning for us that it has for every native *Quebecois(e)*. We, as outsiders to that context, could understand the words but only **thinly** and not **thickly** with their fuller significance.

The distinction between **thick** and **thin** description was first made by Clifford Geertz, the anthropologist, to call attention to the need for context in describing human events. His delightful example was the various meanings attributable to a wink. A deliberate wink, a muscle twitch, a wink that mimics another's wink — are “merely” winks, but they nevertheless have different meanings.

We now know that context is also an essential part of understanding the young child's developing communicative competence. Parents who know the child's history and who share the child's situation, who see the gestures which accompany an utterance, understand richly while visitors must often ask for a translation. Educational psychologists who studied language in isolation thought black children suffered from linguistic deprivation. William Labov who studied speech in context set that myth to rest.

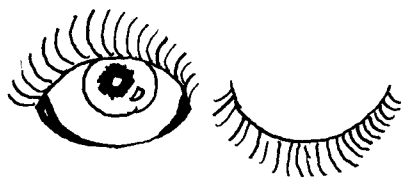
The distinction between context-bound significance and context-free insignificance is important for assessing the potency of educational research. Professional researchers whose roles are too often themselves without context share our dilemma with the license plate: They too must try to understand the message when they have only words to guide them. Research which goes beyond words to include an understanding of the situation which makes words come alive, has the potential to inform practice and thereby be helpful to meaning.

Teachers who live with and within the daily situation where writing is taught have immediate, valuable information available only to outsiders after careful, extensive observation. And even then, outsiders cannot learn what teachers know. It is the teacher who is ideally placed to do meaningful research.

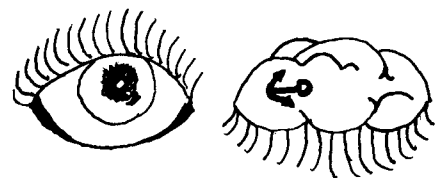
My workshop will begin with a discussion of educational research. I will try to show that research is not tied to method or statistics or tests. Good research asks only that we look closely and systematically at events and report honestly what we see. Research, at least research in human science, has more to do with rhetorical skill than it does with a knowledge of statistics.

We will do research about the writing process that focuses especially on the teaching of writing. We will begin by choosing a topic on which we all can write. For example: “My most frustrating experience as a teacher of writing” or “The way I *turn on* the basic skills class” or “Good assignments I have known” or . . . or . . . We will work out the right topic together, then each of us will write a short description from his or her own experience. Several descriptions will be duplicated (volunteers only) to serve as the basis for analysis. Our goal: To find shared themes in the experience and to discover what these might suggest about improving the teaching of writing.

Although we may not be able to do more than start this process together, I believe we will be able to make a convincing start. The ideas that research is separable from practice, that researchers are not teachers, and that research results are for journals, are unfortunate. I believe we can all profit from looking carefully at our practice. If we wait for outsiders to look at it, we are likely to be disappointed. After all, to them a wink may only be a wink.



deliberate wink



Muscle Twitch