

Mary Blanton  
August 20, 2009

### **Part A.**

If we are to look at or observe other cultures in order to understand and inquire about our own practices and beliefs of education, then hopefully we will be able to better understand the system in which we participate. Ethnographic participant observation is important to education in the sense that when we can observe and understand how other cultures or other groups approach situations, then we are able to learn about ourselves and how we handle those similar situations. Many people like to talk so much that they don't always take the time to watch and listen to others, and it is also not often that we reflect back on how or why we do what we do in order to question our beliefs. If we look at how ethnographic participant observation works as inquiry, then we can see how it may work to examine certain issues in education and its use for those involved in the educational process.

Ethnographic study focuses on observation of other groups or cultures. In the case of Mary Catherine Bateson, she lived among three different societies (Iran, Philippines, and Israel) and observed how each society functioned. In order to be a successful participant observer, one must take the time to really watch and listen to everything going on around a situation and how those involved in that situation are acting. Participant observation does not just mean watching the actions of a certain group and writing the information down. It requires the observer to really think about and inquire into the motivations and behaviors of the group.

In addition to the observation of others, another important part of ethnographic participant observation, and one that is often forgotten, is reflection. If we are to learn anything, we must go back to our own practices and responses to compare and question how that same situation might affect us. We can watch how others interact, and we can observe traditions and cultures from around the world, but if we do nothing with the information, then nothing can be gained. Bateson makes it very clear in her book, *Peripheral Visions*, that it is important to observe or discuss at least three different cultures so that the observer does not compare the groups as being superior over one another. The goal of participant observation is to gain knowledge, not judge.

There are many issues and problems throughout our public education system, though the goal of most teachers, administrators, and parents is the same: we want our children to learn as much as possible in the best way possible. One of the problems with that goal is that we all have differing views on how best to educate our students/children. If we take, for example, the problem of differentiation in classrooms, we have to be able to look outside of our own classrooms in order to find the best solution so that we can then apply it to our teaching. On a smaller scale, we may observe how another classroom is run in a different school, but on a larger scale, we may observe how another country deals with differentiation and students' ability levels.

Another national issue in education is funding for schools and equity among schools that are funded by the government. There are studies that come out all the time comparing the amount of money spent on children in schools around the globe, and these studies compare the United States to other developed nations. If we follow Bateson's rule, then we should not be comparing these countries at all. We should be using the information in order to better funding in this country. We need to figure out how other countries fund their public education and see what could work best for our students.

While ethnographic participant observation has a purpose for examining educational issues, this form of inquiry is also essential among educators and all who have a vested interest in education. Because public education draws students from so many different cultures and backgrounds, it is important for us to understand how different cultures communicate and function if we are to successfully teach children from different backgrounds. The more teachers can learn about and become a participant observer in a variety of cultures, the better our teaching will be. We will be able to understand the motivations of students based on their culture and background. Some students, for example, are ultra-motivated in their studies (as we saw in *Spellbound*), and some of these students are motivated because of their culture. If we observe those students or those cultures, maybe we can use the information to guide our teaching of students who may not see the value in education or those who lack motivation.

Participant observation can have an effect on a classroom teacher, but it can also have an impact on others in the education field. In looking at other cultures and their approach to education, we can enhance our understanding of our own education system. The ideas behind participant observation have the ability to promote change in all areas of education reform. If nothing else, the reflection piece that follows participant observation allows individuals to question how and why we choose to teach the way we do. In this age of globalization, we have a responsibility to our students to provide the best education possible, and one of the best ways to improve our system so that students are prepared to become global citizens is through ethnographic participant observation.

#### **Part B.**

I was pleasantly surprised by this class. I have been teaching for seven years, and as much as I try to reflect back on my own teaching practices, I often do not take the time to do it. ED 800 forced me to really consider what it is that I'm trying to teach my students and how I go about teaching the information and material that I have. Reading Vivian Paley's book, *The Girl with the Brown Crayon*, really opened my eyes to an entirely new way of teaching and reflecting. Paley's organic approach to education, her observation and reflection of her students' habits and interests, and her storytelling technique were eye-opening for me.

Similar to Paley, I try to create a unique sense of community in my classroom. I tell my students from day one that we are a sort of family, and while this is my goal, it was interesting to read about the ways in which Paley really creates a strong bond among her students. She allows her students to disagree and argue with one another, but she is also there to really explain. Instead of being the leader in the front of the classroom giving out directions, Paley is more of a facilitator. She is also not so set in her ways that she is afraid when her curriculum goes down another path. There are many times throughout her book that her students choose the topics of discussion, and Paley is the one who questions the students' responses.

Vivian Paley is also organic in her approach to her curriculum, which I find refreshing. She was able to create an entire curriculum based around her class' interest in a particular book and author. I've actually never thought of doing this. A couple of times throughout a school year, I'll have my students pick choice books to read (books that they choose on their own). While I strongly believe in student choice in reading, choice books can turn into more of an independent study because no two students are reading the same book. I have often thought about having my students lead the curriculum, but I've never put it to use. If Paley is able to get a group of kindergarteners to lead the curriculum, then my high school students, with some facilitation from me, should be able to achieve the same outcome. There were also hints of this type of organic learning in Gardner's *The Disciplined Mind*. A small part of one of his

chapters was about the school in a remote part of Italy that allows children to discover what they are going to learn. I am convinced that learning of this nature is most successful for students, though, with state mandates and standardized testing, we have unfortunately left ourselves little room for such practices.

I was also intrigued by Vivian Paley's ways of observation among her students. Not only does she observe what takes place in her classroom (and with such great detail), but she also reflects upon these observations in order to steer her facilitation of discussion. She truly knows each student's unique personality so well that she is able to understand why her students ask the questions they do or why they argue with one another when they do. When Reeny and Oliver get into a fight because he ruins her collage, Paley becomes the calm presence in the classroom, and she is able to explain to Reeny exactly why Oliver acted the way he did. Many teachers, me included, do not often know or understand the motivations of many of our students. It is much more advantageous for teachers to understand the behaviors of students rather than getting caught up in the frustration of incidents.

Paley does not just stop at the observation of her students. She goes home at night and reflects on what happens in her class. Reflection is what makes teachers better, and I admire the lengths she goes to with her reflection. From what we see in the book, Paley's reflection often drives her curriculum. While I try to reflect on certain lessons or classes I've had in order to change what didn't "work," I don't always use my reflection to change the course of my teaching.

Even in writing her book, Vivian Paley is using storytelling to get at a greater insight. She uses the various stories from her last year of teaching in order to engage her readers – something she also skillfully does as a teacher. Ironically, as an English teacher, I very rarely use stories to teach my students. Of course we read novels, short stories, and poetry, which all tell stories, but I never actually realized the power that storytelling could have on a group of students. Paley does not even necessarily tell her own stories. At different points in her book, she has some of her students' parents come in to tell a story to the class. It is obvious to me that if students can connect in some way to the information that is presented to them, they are more likely to engage, understand, and inquire deeper into the material. I am pretty sure I've always known the previous statement to be true, though I've never really put it to use. Paley's storytelling technique has reenergized me as a teacher, and I'm actually looking forward to implementing this idea more in my teaching this year.

As a teacher, it is my responsibility to teach my students how to think for themselves. As an English teacher, I use literature and writing as an avenue for inquiry so that my students can question others, themselves, and dig deeper into issues they believe to be important. Vivian Paley is one of those "old souls" with whom I could really connect to in terms of her goals and her outlook on education. When I first started reading this book, I did not really know how I was going to relate to stories from a kindergarten teacher, but out of all of the reading I did this summer for this class, I found Vivian Paley to be most refreshing.