CHAPTER 16

Research on Teaching and Classroom Processes

VIEWS FROM TWO PERSPECTIVES

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The search for knowledge to understand and improve the quality and effectiveness of teaching is an endeavor in which educational researchers have been engaged for decades. The focus of this search, however, has changed over time. It has shifted from efforts to identify teacher characteristics that were thought to result in improved student learning, to the development of strategies for training teachers to implement specific curricula. The search has also shifted to the identification of classroom procedures and instructional processes that correlate empirically with greater rates of student academic achievement. The means by which researchers have collected data to guide the search have been diverse, as have the theoretical constructs they have employed to focus their inquiry.

One question that runs throughout this line of research is “What is effective teaching?” Studies conducted in and before the early 1960s yielded for the most part disappointing answers to this question. Early reviews of this research regularly reported insignificant and contradictory findings (Dunkin & Biddle, 1974). In the last 15 years, new approaches emerged from different disciplines, including psychology, sociology, linguistics, and anthropology, to address the issue of teacher effectiveness. Researchers have adapted constructs and methodologies from these disciplines and have developed new ways to study a wider variety of educational events. These advances have significantly expanded our aggregate knowledge of teaching and classroom processes.

Despite this expansion of knowledge, the question “What is effective teaching?” remains only partially answered. It remains so for several reasons. First, there are many questions about the nature and processes of teaching and learning that have yet to be asked or to be investigated. Second, the different perspectives and methods employed to view and analyze classroom events often yield only fragments of classroom reality. Third, recent advances in knowledge coming from the various disciplines and research traditions that have engaged the issue of teaching effectiveness have been made in relatively uncoordinated fashion and have remained virtually unintegrated. As a consequence, we have been discovering more and more
teaching practices and student outcomes (Evertson identifying normative models of teacher behaviors important general relationships that exist between that relate to student outcomes across time and 
to identify and to integrate knowledge derived from different traditions of research (Bolster, 1983; Gage, 1985; Sergiovanni, 1984; Soltis, 1984).

In this chapter, we review selected findings from two traditions of educational research that have made significant contributions to our knowledge of teaching and classroom processes—process–product research and sociolinguistic research. We examine each of these traditions as lenses through which we view the events of the classroom. We shall describe each lens and contrast each focus. Then, highlighting findings of several major studies we consider how each presents a different but complementary view of teaching in three areas: (a) teacher planning and decision making, (b) classroom management, (c) academic instruction. Our purpose extends beyond a comparative synthesis of research on teaching. In this discussion we attempt to make a broader argument for an integrative perspective to draw together heretofore disparate bodies of knowledge.

Ryle (1949) suggests a useful point of departure for developing an integrative perspective. While we will not engage the debate of the logic behind the definitions or the reduction of his terms (see Hartland-Swann, 1956, Roland, 1961), Ryle’s distinction between knowledge related to facts and propositions—"knowing that"—and knowledge related to process and practice—"knowing how"—lead us to argue that we should be concerned with discovering, not only the relationships that exist between behavior and outcomes, but how particular relationships come about. In other words, we should be concerned with knowing not only that a particular relationship exists between behavior x and outcome y, but with knowing how behavior x functions in its relationship to y.

Until now much of classroom research from the psychological perspective has been concerned with identifying normative models of teacher behaviors that relate to student outcomes across time and context. This approach has been in the mainstream of research on teaching for the last 15 years. It has served and continues to serve an important function of mapping unknown territory and identifying important general relationships that exist between teaching practices and student outcomes (Evertson & Green, 1986). However, in order to understand more completely classroom realities, we must, as Wittrock (1985) suggests, begin to enlarge the perspective of teaching–learning processes presented by educational psychology (see also Gage, 1985; Shulman, 1986). We must try to determine how the processes identified from the psychological perspective function in specific contexts on an evolving basis. Sociolinguistic research provides one important way to gain this understanding. Together, sociolinguistic and process–product research provide equally important perspectives to construct and understanding of the that’s and the how’s of teaching and classroom processes.

This review is a first attempt and a first step toward looking across research traditions to knowledge and understanding of teaching. The findings we present are illustrative rather than inclusive. We chose to review and compare aspects of process–product and sociolinguistic research traditions not to imply that these bodies of knowledge present a complete picture of classroom events. To the contrary, there exist other important bodies of research from sociological, psychological, and anthropological traditions that significantly add to our understanding of teaching and learning. Further, we do not propose to cover completely each of the traditions included in our discussion. We have, instead, been selective to show how two traditions examine in different ways different aspects of several of the same broad areas of classroom activity.

Two Lenses—Different Perspectives

The first tradition we examine has developed from what has been called the process–product research paradigm. Process–product research generally focuses on the teacher and looks across a large number of classrooms to identify teacher behaviors (processes) that correlate with student outcome measures (products). This can be considered a macro view of classrooms. Investigations using this approach are concerned with examining variation between groups and with developing a summary model of classroom teaching processes. They are less concerned with the specifics of context and variation within groups.

The second tradition is sociolinguistic research. This tradition is part of a broader area of research on communication (see e.g., Gumperz, 1982;