ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study was conducted which analyzed the complex teaching behaviors of a distinguished professor at a large university. Reputed to be a gifted instructor, his teaching was investigated through direct observation, videotaping, questionnaires and indepth interviews to determine specifically how the professor accomplished his teaching goals. A detailed descriptive account of teacher–student interaction is provided, as well as an analysis of why the instruction is successful from both perspectives. A major finding was that the instructor incorporated a storytelling technique to impart information and to involve students. This technique was repeatedly confirmed by students, teachers and investigators. Further, other teaching behaviors that promoted student learning were documented and analyzed. Finally, the implications of ethnographic research for understanding effective instruction is discussed.

Introduction

Stories are the stuff of life, . . . Stories are to teach, to learn, to entertain, to enjoy, to inspire . . . to tell. Telling stories is sharing life experience, real and imaginary. So stories are to tell by everyone with experience to share with those who have ears to hear. The teller and the listener together create the story, for like a song that lives only when it is sung and heard, a story lives only when it is told and heard. (Tooze, 1959)
TJ is a professor in agriculture who will not be easily forgotten by his students. For TJ, instruction is serious business with a personal side. By combining the art of storytelling with a scientific management of instruction, he guided his students through ten weeks of learning. In TJ's class, stories were used to effectively communicate and share information with students. Through stories he was able to teach, facilitate learning, entertain and inspire. However, neither TJ nor his students were fully aware of the integration of storytelling with teaching and its impact in the classroom. Our interest in TJ grew out of consultations and research with college faculty at Michigan State University. While many studies have emphasized the principles of effective instruction derived from educational psychology and communication, seldom has a master of teaching been studied in the college classroom. This study set out to explore and explain effective college teaching. The purpose of this paper is to describe how teaching and storytelling were integrated and developed within TJ's class. It will also address the impact this approach had on students' perceptions of their learning and motivation.

Prior Research

For years researchers and college teachers have been interested in learning more about classroom instruction. Some researchers have focused on characteristics of effective instructors (Wilson and Gaff, 1975; Eble, 1972; Axelrod, 1973). Others have examined the context of college instruction. Becker et al. (1968) observed and interviewed college students to gain insights into their attitudes and goals. Mann et al. (1970) studied activities and interpersonal relationships in the college classroom. Recently, researchers have begun to investigate how people interact in classrooms in order to attain their instructional goals. Florio (1978) and Mehan (1978) studied in detail how successful elementary teachers instruct. Moore (1977) addressed the question of the nature of social order in an alternative high school. Cooper (1979, 1981) examined the dynamics of the instructional process in a college classroom.

To better understand the instructional process in the college classroom, four successful instructors at Michigan State University have been studied in detail. One instructor's methods of orchestrating teaching and learning in his class will be described. This description will also entail how multiple corroborative methods provided access into the instructional process and tapped the instructor's and students' perspectives of the same event. This inquiry process is rooted in the ethnographic research of Erickson (1976), McDermott (1977), Florio (1978), Mehan (1978) and Cooper (1979, 1981).