



Some Lessons Learned About Teaching, Research, and Academic Disputation

Frederick Erickson



I started out in the bottom reading group, and so I know what that feels like. In September 1947 I was placed in the bottom reading group in first grade, in Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, where I grew up. By March I still was not learning to read and was on schedule to fail first grade. At that point my mother decided to teach me to read. (Earlier in the year she had asked the teacher if she could help me at home and the teacher told her no—let us do it at school. This was a first year teacher prepared by a two-year course at normal school, in emergency recruitment of

teachers after WWII.) I began to read over the next months, fairly quickly beginning to “get it.” Since my learning at home was accelerating, my parents spoke about my situation to the superintendent of schools, whom they knew. He agreed to examine me before school began in the fall. And if I was able to read, I would be allowed to go on to second grade. On a hot day in August I went to his office, he handed me the last of the first grade “Dick and Jane” basal readers, and I read it aloud to him, fluently. Two weeks later I matriculated in second grade and soon became an avid reader, in a trajectory that has continued ever since.

My mother was a children’s librarian. My father was a small town businessman. They were both college graduates, members of local community social networks through which they were acquainted with the school superintendent. And they were White. In addition, my mother possessed very well-developed literacy skills, with a number of years’ professional experience in supporting children’s early reading. As a family we didn’t have much money but we had a lot of cultural and social capital in a small community where everybody knew everybody else, especially in the professional class. *Lessons learned:* For succeeding in school it’s an advantage not to be stigmatized by race and class, and to have credibility and connections. If my family had been poor, and especially if we had been both poor and Black or Latino, the odds would have been very different for me. I would have continued to struggle with

reading, my parents would have been very unlikely to be able to advocate successfully for me to the school superintendent, and I would most likely have been flushed down the drain at the beginning of my school career. Another “school failure.” (I now think of “school failure” as a school problem, rather than as a student problem or a parent problem—schools failing to teach.)

In 1959 as a college freshman I was a music student at Northwestern University, with a double major in composition and music history. Halfway through undergraduate school I helped to organize fellow music students to give free music lessons on Saturdays in North Lawndale, an African American inner city neighborhood on Chicago’s West Side. We taught at a YMCA, and as time went on I became more and more engaged with what was happening in that neighborhood and less engaged with music school, even as I continued for a fifth year and received a master’s degree in music history. Along the way I took courses in the anthropology department, in ethnomusicology (the study of world music) and in folklore, as well as Anthro 101 and a course on psychological anthropology, in which I was introduced to the child rearing research of John and Beatrice Whiting at Harvard.

After graduating I got a small grant from a local foundation, the W. Clement Stone Foundation, to develop an after-school informal education program for early teens in Lawndale, titled “Afro-American History in Music.”

(Stone was an eccentric self-made insurance magnate who wrote on positive thinking and gave generous support to Chicago youth agencies, principally the Boy’s Clubs and also the

YMCA.) From a pay phone in the main Music Building on campus I telephoned Stone at cocktail hour at his North Shore home. The butler answered, and I said “This is Frederick Erickson calling from Northwestern University (literally true). I would like to speak to Mr. Stone about an idea for an after-school education program for teenagers in Lawndale.”

The butler said he would ask if Mr. Stone was available to talk with me. A few moments later Stone’s voice came on the phone and I sketched the proposed program. He said, “Send a proposal letter to my personal secretary at company headquarters,” and gave me her name. (*Lesson learned:* A certain amount of gall—chutzpah—doesn’t hurt when you are asking for funding.) I also did youth work with older teenagers, some of whom were members of local street gangs. I met parents of those young people. For six months I taught a basic education class in a steel plant, with employment trainees who were high school dropouts. It was a heady time—Dr. Martin Luther King came to that neighborhood, with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s “Northern Initiative.” I was a volunteer in that effort, as well as helping with a newly established local community organization modeled on Saul Alinsky’s approach.

I was assigned as the Y staff liaison for a program of musical and dance performance called “Teens with Talent.” It was organized by a volunteer youth leader, Al Johnson, who was at that time a janitor at the Hawthorne Electric plant on Cicero Avenue, then owned by Illinois Bell Telephone Company. (Al later became a public and community relations man for Illinois Bell and even later set up his own public relations consulting business. Among

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his clients for help in a mayoralty race was Richard Hatcher, who became the first African American mayor of a major U.S. city, Gary, Indiana.) Singers and dancers in “Teens with Talent” developed their own songs and choreography, in the “Soul” style of the Motown Sound. One of my jobs with the program was to write out the words, melody, and chord changes for the songs that were created by singing groups, since the young performers, who were mostly school dropouts, did not read and write words well, nor did they read musical notation. I was a scribe for the groups, producing the written text for applications for copyright for their songs. I sat in on the composition process, watching as the young men produced initial snatches of melodies and some lyrics, and then—usually over the space of two days of continuous, careful effort—crafted a whole song with complete lyrics, melody, and accompaniment by two guitars and drums, with dance steps for the singers.

I remember being in the YMCA Boy’s Section on weekday afternoons as kids came in from school. They walked slowly, with heads down, like zombies. After about 20 minutes it was as if they’d had oxygen—they became more animated—the talkative, curious, energetic kids I knew them to be. But their entry behavior was so consistent, I wondered, “Why are they so shut down? Is it something about school?” I also listened to older youth in a job training program, after they had come back from job interviews. Quite often they would say something like, “I talked to ‘the Man’ and he acted like I was stupid—like I didn’t know anything.” I wondered what was going on in those interviews.

In the after-school program I learned something fundamental about curriculum and teaching. I had gotten the idea for the program from study in the anthropology department at Northwestern.

That department was founded by and guided in its development by a student of Franz Boas, Melville Herskovits, who had specialized in study of the “African Diaspora”—tracing the lives of slaves who had been taken to the New World, and their descendants—from West Africa, through the Caribbean and the American South. Herskovits and his colleagues were interested in African survival in New World situations—a notion that was then controversial but since has been more and more seriously considered.

My idea was to trace West African patterns in musical style and in sociocultural purposes of music in everyday life, as musical practices traveled and were transformed in New World contexts, from the Caribbean to the rural American south, and eventually to the urban American north (ultimately showing up as African roots in the “Motown Sound” that was currently popular among the teenagers). Rather than the then-typical curricula in “Negro History,” which emphasized heroes and holidays [in those days Booker T. Washington (vocational education), George Washington Carver (peanuts) and Charles Drew (blood plasma and blood banks) were prominent, “safe” heroes] “Afro-American History in Music” would be about the anonymous musicians and their audiences who flourished, albeit within circumstances of oppression, across the full temporal/spatial scope of the West African Diaspora. I created teaching materials for eight sessions, for groups meeting once a week after school. The sequence of topics was chronological—starting with West Africa and then covering the Caribbean, the southern US, and culminating with the urban north.

The very first meeting was held on a Wednesday afternoon at Project House, a community center in East Garfield Park sponsored by the American Friends’ Service

Committee, and then directed by Bernard Lafayette, one of the original Freedom Riders, who was working as an advance man for Dr. King's upcoming Northern Initiative. The group of about 10 middle school age boys and girls was taught by a very experienced leader, Ella Jenkins, an African American folk singer and youth worker who had begun her career with the YWCA and who had made a series of recordings of southern Negro children's songs on the Folklore label that were quite popular then among early childhood educators (and are still in use today).

I had prepared slides, audiotape clips of music, and examples of musical instruments for each session, and I was present in the first session to run the projector and audio recorder so Ella could concentrate on leading group discussion. The lights came down and the first slide image came up on the projection screen. It was an outline map of the African continent (the curriculum was organized chronologically). There was an awkward silence as half the kids looked down from the screen and actually slid off their chairs to the ground in embarrassment. In that moment Ella and I realized that the chronological sequence of topics, however logical it might have been from a scholarly point of view, was not going to work with these kids, without major interpretive framing. She asked them to talk about it—one boy mumbled "Tarzan," and the other kids laughed. Africa, and its outline map, was a deeply felt stigma for them. Ella—so skilled with kids—listened, got the kids to say more about their feelings of shame, and gently

began to explain the purposes of the sessions—we listened to a few of the musical clips, as she pointed out the skill involved in the polyrhythms of Yoruba and Akan drum music from Nigeria, Ghana, and Ivory Coast .

The next Wednesday all the young people came back, and we went on with the sessions. Along the way we found that not only was Africa an image of shame—so was the American South. It was "country." This in spite of—indeed because of the fact that all the African American young people whose families had recently arrived on Chicago's West Side had come from the South—mostly from the Mississippi Delta and western Tennessee. But now they lived in the "city" and for teenagers and even grade-schoolers, "country" was an epithet—fights got started by calling somebody "country."

As a well-meaning white liberal ethnomusicologist/curriculum developer, I'd prepared slides and musical examples of unamplified ("box") guitar playing and blues singing by famous early blues artists and of rural church singing ("linin' out"—"old Dr. Watts") and these were just as embarrassing for the kids, at first hearing, as had been the music from West Africa. They even heard as "country" the "urban blues" (with amplified guitar) of Muddy Waters and B.B. King. Never mind that

there were lots of similarities in chord progressions, rhythms, and vocal qualities between urban blues and the "Motown Sound"—what the kids heard was not similarity but difference. Smoky Robinson was "city"—B.B. King was "country." (For

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that matter, so was Dr. Martin Luther King seen as “country” by Lawndale teenagers. That was a problem with his and SCLC’s attempts at organizing.) We figured out ways to get the kids to talk about their feelings, and to some extent we could reframe with them a less embarrassing look at the music of the American South, but the reframing had to be done—on the spot. Otherwise, no deal.

Lesson learned: good teaching and subject matter doesn’t just consist in logical organization of content and clarity in its presentation (“I taught ‘em—put it out there—but they didn’t learn it.”) Good teaching and subject matter have to take into account the perspectives, feelings, and identity commitments of learners. Learners “vote” on what they are being taught, as the teaching is happening in real time. They can vote “yes”—this feels like me—or they can vote “no”—this is not me. (“You can bring a horse to water but you can’t make it drink.”) In later years I developed this idea as a notion of student learning what is being taught as a matter of political assent, and I argued for the importance of identifying students’ lived experience of everyday life in school (Erickson, 1987; Erickson et al., 2007). We don’t all occupy the same meaning-space, we inhabit differing lifeworlds, and that’s fundamental for pedagogy.

Certain learning environments can have “bad breath” for students—that’s an apt metaphor, since bad breath is not necessarily intended but it’s a fact as experienced with others in interaction. Whether the bad breath comes from a social arrangement in instruction (e.g. for me in first grade reading instruction in the face threat of “flash cards” about which I didn’t know the right answer—so excruciating and overwhelming as a public display of my incompetence), or from the subject matter content (e.g. the outline map of Africa

appearing suddenly on the projection screen), bad breath is toxic for learning. Teaching and curriculum, if it is to be effective, must take this into account. One size does not fit all. That was a fundamentally important lesson I began to learn as I watched kids slide off their chairs in embarrassment at the beginning of the first “lesson” I had designed to be taught.

I decided to switch fields and work in urban education, returning to Northwestern in the fall of 1966 with B. J. Chandler, the dean of the school of education, as my advisor. (*Lesson learned:* it helps to have the dean as your advisor.) There were new kinds of studies forming—anthropology of education, ethnographic studies of communication, sociolinguistics. I started reading the recently published child development literature on inner city children and their families—and I was appalled. The children were described as cognitively and linguistically deprived—yet I had met kids in Lawndale who were curious, insightful, adept practitioners of verbal art, and good at argumentation. The literature said the kids were incapable of sustained effort and attention, but I knew young men who worked for months to buy a leather jacket, some of them who also played chess avidly and skillfully, and as already noted, others who would craft songs carefully even as they had trouble reading and writing. (*Lesson learned:* don’t believe everything you see in print.)

One of my teachers, the anthropologist Edward T. Hall, was a specialist in intercultural communication—and he showed us that what he called “informal culture” can be especially troublesome in inter-ethnic communication—patterns of thought, action, and feeling we’re not consciously aware of as we learn and practice them. Things go wrong in interaction with others and we don’t know why it feels so awkward

and alienating. [Years later my colleague Susan Philips, studying Native American kids at home and in school, would call this “invisible culture” (Philips, 1983).]

Two sociologists, Aaron Cicourel and John Kitsuse, had recently published a study of academic advising at Evanston high school, right up the street from Northwestern. They reported that advisors, talking with Black and White students with very similar academic records, tended to discourage the educational aspirations of Black students and tended to encourage those of White students (Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1963). I wondered if what Ned Hall had been thinking of as informal cultural communication style had anything to do with what Cicourel and Kitsuse had found with the academic advisors—how was encouragement or discouragement being done, interactionally? If I could get a tape recorder in there—or better, a sound cinema camera or video camera—maybe I could find out.

Fast forward to more lessons learned. *First lesson*: the endurance of “deficit” perspectives on inner city children and their parents. I got my Ph.D. in 1969 and began life as a full time university professor—teaching first at the new campus of the University of Illinois in Chicago, then Harvard, Michigan State, Penn and finally UCLA, across 43 years, until 2011. At each university I went to (and in each public school as I began to study early grades classrooms using video and long term participant observation) I would find versions of the “deficit” image of inner city kids (or Native American kids). Descriptions of what they didn’t have, rather than what they had. In the early 1970s my own cohort of young scholars (many of us inspired by Ed Gordon [2017], for a recent summary of his views), among others—he was one of my heroes then, and he still is) did a variety of studies showing

cultural and community strengths rather than deficits. About 10 years later I consulted some widely read introductory texts in educational psychology and found the same early studies from the 1960s that I’d encountered as they were first appearing in print, cited now without critical commentary. (I’ve done this twice since, for the 1990s and for the early years past 2000, with similar results.) Since the 1990s Luis Moll and his colleagues have been studying families’ “funds of knowledge”—what they know rather than what they don’t know (Moll et al., 1992), yet the deficit narratives persist, coming out of the box again and again, like Dracula.

Why is this? First, the silo/bubble filter situation in educational research. Child development researchers and others weren’t reading my work, and that of my colleagues, or they were just dismissing it as “qualitative” and “anecdotal.” Second, no one would want to argue that poverty and racial ethnic and language discrimination don’t have negative effects. To grow up in Lawndale was not easy. That was evident, even though as an outsider I was only partially able to recognize and understand everyday life there. And it’s not to say that I never met a teenager or adult there who was lazy, self-destructive, or violent—of course I did. One can always find instances of ignorance and moral turpitude in neighborhoods where poor people of non-dominant backgrounds live—as well as in neighborhoods where rich White people live. The majority of people I met in Lawndale were working hard, living reasonable, orderly lives, albeit in difficult circumstances. (My friend Ray McDermott says that “everybody’s busy” and “everybody’s making sense.” Some of this agency and sense-making may be taking place in conditions of oppression, but it’s still agency and sense.)

Third, and perhaps most important, over the years I've come to realize that to understand the persuasive power of deficit narratives we need to turn to cultural and historical studies more broadly. Dorothy Holland and her colleagues (Holland et al 2001) say that culture produces encompassing ontological stories—“figured worlds” with actors, actions, and situations sketched for us. George Lakoff (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) says we live by metaphors. Edward Said (1978) says we “other” those we see as different. From these perspectives deficit narratives can be seen as the flip side of the American Dream narrative—if you work hard and are talented you will succeed. If you are poor that means either you didn't work hard or that you aren't talented—you are not one of us. By extension, in the figured worlds of American schooling, not learning to read becomes framed as moral failure, inviting “othering”—and remember that our public schools developed in Puritan New England, where a child's trouble with learning to read was seen as evidence of the devil's influence, hence birch rod pedagogy—whip the devil out of the boy or girl you see in the 17th century version of the bottom reading group.

Another lesson came soon after I became a full-time university faculty member. Somehow through graduate school, first in music and then in education and social science, I had been naïve about the infighting and backbiting that take place in academia. (The Latin motto of Northwestern, *Quaecumquae sunt vera*, “whatsoever things are true” I took literally as the aim of the university.) Within six months of my first university appointment, at the then-brand new campus of the University of Illinois in Chicago, I'd been through enough college of education faculty meetings and university senate meetings to realize that the disinterested pursuit of truth was not what was happening. Turf struggles led to faculty not playing well with others,

and the interdisciplinarity of education as a field—a potential source of strength—seemed instead beset by silo isolation. Across disciplines and interest groups faculty didn't listen to each other.

I was very troubled by this, and turned for counsel to one of my mentors, Armin Beck, who had also joined the ed school faculty. He had been a very successful suburban school superintendent who left that career to try to foster educational justice in urban schooling. Well aware of academia's flaws, he asked if I had read C. P. Snow's novel, “The Masters.” It tells of rivalries, dirty tricks, and snide put-downs in an Oxbridge college; a fictional setting modeled closely after real ones. I realized that what I was seeing at U of Illinois Chicago Circle was not just a local phenomenon—it was endemic in the academy. (Later I heard the line attributed to Robert Hutchins, then retired as president of the University of Chicago: “Politics on campus are the worst kind because the stakes are so small.”) Some of the competitive sniping ran along lines of the “qualitative-quantitative” divide, but it wasn't just that.

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At my next university, Harvard, it became apparent that teacher education, curriculum, and school administration were devalued, in contrast to “research.” Moreover, the research that counted most (whether in economics, psychology, or

sociology) involved strong causal analysis along Humean lines (regularity of association between an antecedent and a consequent occurrence) that would enable prediction and control—studies that “generalized.” This was a kind of social physics (for more extensive discussion see Erickson 2017) whose aims were very different from the close attention to particulars that had been modeled for me in musicology and in the natural history approach taken by cultural anthropology. I had assumed that given the recentness of educational research and of social science more generally, attempts at strong causal claims were premature—it would take generations of natural history inquiry, with careful attention to variation across local settings, before we would be ready to discover “what works,” and then not what works in general, but what works in a specific local situation. There might be family resemblances across local situations, but local “context” would have to be taken into account in each local setting.

The “hard science” definition in educational research was even more prominent in my next university experience at the Institute for Teaching (IRT) at Michigan State University. There I encountered firsthand the “process-product” approach to research on teaching. This attempt at informing a “science of teaching” was initiated by Nathaniel Gage, among others. Data from checklist-observation of teaching practice (as representation of the “process”) were correlated with data on student learning, from standardized tests administered at the end of the year (as representation of the “product”). Sooner or later, it was believed, these data would enable researchers to determine which pedagogical moves

teachers should make in conducting effective whole group instruction. The approach was widely practiced at that time, receiving lots of funding, and its practitioners were not interested in long term natural-historical study of classrooms. One day I approached the faculty mailboxes to pick up my mail and two of my colleagues from the institute were standing there. One had just looked at a postcard he received from a process-product researcher at another university. He showed it to the other guy and they both laughed. “Come and see this, Fred, it’s really funny,” the first colleague said. I looked at the postcard. It had only one line: “Real men don’t do ethnography.” Not funny, I thought.

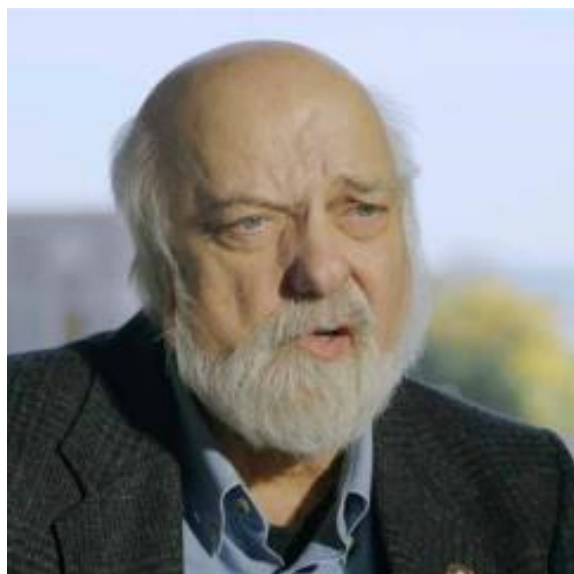
Lesson learned: if at all possible, try to avoid “othering” those scholars whose academic tribal affiliation differs from yours. Do not assume malevolence or ignorance in those with whom you disagree.

At the same time I had been working on writing a chapter on qualitative methods in research on teaching, for the 3rd edition of the AERA sponsored *Handbook of Research on Teaching* (Erickson, 1986). When I was invited to be the author of that chapter I found it a daunting prospect. Those of us at MSU who were writing handbook chapters had them published first as working papers through the IRT, and Jere Brophy who was then a co-director of the IRT had the responsibility for reviewing our drafts before they were released in the working papers series. My chapter had two parts. The first half was a review of qualitative inquiry, framing rationales for it and discussing its aims and the substantive focus of qualitative research questions, in contrast to the questions addressed by the more conventional ways of studying teaching at that time—the early 1980s. The opening discussion in the chapter was really hard to write, and I struggled over it. The second half was a “how to do it” discussion, based on my (then) 10 years’ experience in teaching

classes in introductory qualitative research methods. That was the easy part.

Jere called me to his office to have a discussion of my chapter draft. He said that he thought the second half of my chapter was the clearest explication of qualitative methods that he'd ever seen (and he noted that he had started out preparing to be a clinical psychologist, so he had a certain feel for qualitative work). BUT, he said, the first half of the chapter was “just politics. It will make a lot of people angry, and that's not necessary and not in your interest.” So his advice was to delete the first half of the chapter. I thought the first half was more than “just politics”—it was the most important part of the chapter—an attempt to raise and discuss issues that hadn't been yet addressed by previous writing on qualitative methods for educational research. Consequently I insisted that the first half be left in the chapter, and that is how it was eventually published. (*Lesson learned*—if you believe in your work, don't let it be silenced. More on that later, on sticking to your guns.)

At the time I undertook that essay I couldn't anticipate its consequences as they unfolded in later years. Lee Shulman had said to me, by way of encouragement as I



expressed doubts about the task, “If you write this chapter you will become the ‘Donald Campbell’ of qualitative research on teaching.” (Lee was referring to the wide influence of Campbell's chapter on experimental methods, co-authored with Julian Stanley, which had appeared in the first edition of the *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, whose editor was Nathaniel Gage.) I thought that Lee was exaggerating. (He was very persuasive in urging people forward—behind his back we called him the “Pied Piper of research on teaching.”) As it played out, the chapter I wrote was indeed very timely. It was widely read and influential, and it continues to be cited still today.

In the year the *Handbook* appeared in print I was invited to speak on methods of research on teaching in a dialogue session at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. The other presenter was to be David Berliner, a process-product researcher who had been a student of Gage. I approached this “battle of the bands” session with trepidation, but only wrote out a few notes because I had no idea what would happen in the encounter. I came early to the session, with a slight hangover from convention celebration the night before. It was a big room and already 100 people were there. At least 150 more entered and settled. (“Oh-oh,” I thought—“This is going to be a big deal. I'm in real trouble, and I didn't even prepare.”) As I remember it, Berliner spoke first and he was very reasonable. He even said some complimentary things about ethnography. Instead of the dog-fight I was expecting, the session turned into a relatively ecumenical discussion of differing points of view—and some similarities. (It reminded me of my earlier experience at the YMCA, where I met Republican businessmen who were members of our board and some of whom seemed genuinely concerned about the conditions of poverty and racism found in

Lawndale. From my youth participation in and identification with Minnesota Democratic/Farmer-Labor party politics I'd assumed that Republicans just didn't care about poor people.) *Lesson learned:* if at all possible, try to avoid "othering" those scholars whose academic tribal affiliation differs from yours. Do not assume malevolence or ignorance in those with whom you disagree. (It must be said that some of my academic antagonists over the years have shown ill will or stupidity, but most have not. It's not that simple.)

A next lesson along similar lines came from my last year at Michigan State, 1985, just before I went to the University of Pennsylvania. By then my own work had shifted from ethnographic studies of classrooms to collaborative action research with small groups of teachers who wanted to reflect on their practice in order to try to improve it. (I said I'd wanted to move from "research on teaching" to "research in teaching.") At that time I also was serving a term as a member of the advisory board of the IRT. The "What Works?" pamphlet had been published by the federal department of education, in the third year of the Reagan administration. Judith Lanier, our college dean, had floated a new idea for partnerships between our school of education and public schools. A particular public school would join with the university as a "professional development school" and faculty and graduate students from the IRT would provide in-service training for the school's teachers, drawing on conclusions from studies done in the Institute. The relation of "research to practice" was one-way—researchers telling teachers what to do. (This was an earlier version of the current "best practices" movement.) In the board meeting I said I thought that recommendations of specific teaching practices were premature, and that rather than looking for "research-based practice" we should be trying to do "practice-based

research." Although some of my faculty colleagues on the board agreed with me, my line of argument did not sit well with most of the faculty board members, nor with the dean. The discussion became quite heated as I reiterated my concerns about the arrogance of prescribing for practice at this stage in the evolution of research on teaching.

When we broke for lunch I was seated with two officers of the Michigan Education Association—the Michigan NEA affiliate. They had not been at the board meeting but had come for an afternoon session in which the dean would present her vision of "professional development schools." They seemed to be interested in getting research findings from the IRT. I said, "It seems to me that lots of educational research isn't done well or is inconclusive, and individual studies often contradict one another. So why would you want sets of "findings" from the IRT?" One of the MEA officers said, "We want things to tell our teacher membership so that when principals or superintendents order them to do something new—and that "research" supports that—our members will have their own "research" findings that contradict what the administrators are pushing." I thought to myself, "Once again, Fred, you have been so naïve. This is not knowledge in the abstract—it's knowledge for use in organizational arm wrestling." (Something quite other than Northwestern's *Quaecumque sunt vera*.)

In the afternoon David Cohen approached me. I'd known him at Harvard and even before that when I worked with Armin Beck in the mid-1960s on school desegregation efforts in Illinois. David had been a consultant to our project. He'd just joined the MSU faculty and had been appointed to the IRT advisory board. David said, "I want to talk to you—let's have coffee tomorrow." The next day we met and

in a friendly way he gave me sage advice. He said that as I'd dug in my heels in the board meeting I was fighting a battle that was impossible to win. It wasn't worth dying in a ditch over. I said, "But much of what the IRT is producing is pedestrian, or just plain wrong!" David smiled and said, "You know, you and I are lucky when anything we do is even half right—in other words, at best all of us are usually half wrong." (And so, "Fred—lighten up, pick your fights more carefully, and don't assume that anyone is absolutely right, including you.") That was wise counsel.

A few years later I discovered that Nate Gage had named me as a poster boy in the paradigm wars over qualitative versus quantitative research (Gage, 1989). I met him for the first time in the fall of 1998 when I became a Spencer Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford. The director of the Center, Neil Smelser, hosted a reception for new fellows at his house, and former fellows, including Gage and Lee Shulman were there. Lee introduced me to Gage, who did a double take at the introduction—I may have been oversensitive but I thought he looked at me with a startle response, as if I were dangerous. My next encounter with Nate came in May 2006, near the end of a subsequent year of residence at the Center. I'd gone to a doctor's office for a checkup on a cellulitis infection I'd contracted in my left leg on a return flight from a brief speaking engagement in Sweden. As I entered the waiting room, accompanied by my wife I recognized Nate, who was accompanied by a caretaker/assistant. He was there for monitoring a chronic condition. I

introduced myself and my wife and this time Nate was cordial. He told me what he was there for and I told him about my cellulitis, which I thought was pretty much resolved at that point. He said that before we left the Center he'd like to invite us to dinner. We exchanged email addresses, and sure enough in about a week an invitation came from him. We joined Nate and his caretaker/assistant at an outdoor table at a local restaurant and had a very enjoyable evening. He said he was working on a book on teaching that would argue for more whole group direct instruction in classrooms. I didn't think that was a good idea, but the combination of David Cohen's advice and the passage of time since then had helped me contain the impulse to argue with Nate. He died two years later, at the end of the summer. Nate's graciousness was another lesson for me in not "othering" those with whom you disagree.

I think that the positive frame for our meeting in the doctor's office had to do with lessons from experience I learned during the course of research—lessons about what we came to call "co-membership" (more on co-membership later). Various lessons came from a line of research I began soon after completing my Ph.D. My dissertation research had been on argumentation in small groups of early teens, using audio recording. Ned Hall advised me to apply for funds from the Center for Metropolitan Problems at NIMH for a study of inter-racial and inter-ethnic relations in urban job-interviews and academic advising interviews. (*Lesson learned*: tips about funding can be very helpful.) This was a chance to follow up on the issues that Cicourel and Kitsuse had raised in their study of advising. I was able to make sound cinema films of "gatekeeping interviews" with simultaneous video

Lesson learned—find peers who really understand what you are trying to do, and create your own "invisible college" on a small scale. Then stay with it for the rest of your career.

recording to see what was going on in “talking to the Man.” The interviews were filmed in Chicago in 1970-71 and I spent the next four years intensively analyzing the films, having moved by then to teach at Harvard.

It was lonely work—almost no one was doing it then. I met fellow junior scholars who thought I was only a little crazy, Ray McDermott (a student of George Spindler) and Bud Mehan (a student of Aaron Cicourel). Together with my first doctoral student Jeffrey Shultz we started to present together at academic meetings, hanging out together on afternoons and evenings in our hotel rooms, showing each other video and film footage as work in progress. This wasn’t just encouragement—it was brainstorming and criticism, albeit criticism of a friendly sort. As peers we could have competed (and inevitably there was a little of that among us) but overwhelmingly what we were doing was collaborating, developing new approaches to close analysis and transcription of social interaction, using audiovisual records as a primary data source. Because the equipment we carried through airports on the way to academic meetings was so cumbersome (reel to reel video playback decks, slow motion 16 mm cinema projectors, and big speakers for sound) Jeff Shultz came up with a whimsical name for our group—the “SHLEPPERS.” (This was deliberately spelled differently from the Yiddish term “schlep”—it stood for “The society for the hermeneutic location of everyday practices, primarily in educational research settings.) Over the years a few more members were inducted—we had become a tiny “invisible college” (the term is Francis Bacon’s) who shared specialized skills and interests, gathering as opportunities arose. The original SHLEPPERS are still in touch today, continuing to provide advice and support to each other. *Lesson learned*—find peers who really understand what you are

trying to do, and create your own “invisible college” on a small scale. Then stay with it for the rest of your career.

During the mid-1970s I was encouraged also by some senior scholars, including a well-known linguistic anthropologist, John Gumperz from UC Berkeley, as well as by Courtney Cazden and Beatrice Whiting and Laurence Wylie at Harvard (*Lesson learned*: Find at least a few more advanced colleagues as mentors. Also lesson learned—stick to your guns; don’t give up or compromise on innovative work. Take a chance.)

Over the years my research interest in gatekeeping encounters continued—situations of face to face interaction between an institutional officer and someone whose performance is being judged. The first kinds of gatekeeping I studied were, as noted, job interviews and academic advising. In later research I considered school classroom gatekeeping in studies of elementary school teachers, and medical service provision gatekeeping in studies of physicians with patients.

One lesson learned was that gatekeeping situations are not only ubiquitous in modern life, but that life chances are directly affected by the ways interaction takes place there—feliculously or infeliculously. These are sites in which, to use more recent language, social reproduction or transformation happens, right on the ground. Domination doesn’t occur automatically, or anonymously, just as a result of abstract, impersonal social forces. The wider social order may influence the local order, constraining choices there, but domination, or resistance, or transformation ultimately happen in what Goffman called the “interaction order” as people deal with one another face to face. (Goffman, 1983; see also Mehan, 1978) When things go sour in those encounters, those who are gatekept experience what my UCLA colleague Daniel

Solorzano and other colleagues have come to call “micro-aggressions”—micro in that they happen over and over, not in that they are necessarily tiny (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano 2009).

Another lesson learned came as a group of graduate students and I began data analysis at Harvard. Jeff Shultz had a key role in this as a doctoral student—he had a wonderful nose for evidence and patterns. (He had been “given” to me by Bea Whiting—the famous anthropologist who was now my senior colleague and who had been Jeff’s advisor. She said, “You should have a really good research assistant.”) As we carefully transcribed speech and nonverbal behavior on the films and read transcripts of comments made by the advisor and the student as they reviewed video of their interview in separate “viewing sessions” something odd was happening. I had expected that the more culturally and socially “different” were the interlocutors in the interviews, the more interactional stumbling would occur—behaviorally evident discomfort—and more negative interpersonal attributions. Conversely, if the advisor and the student were ethnically and racially similar I expected things to go more smoothly and positively.

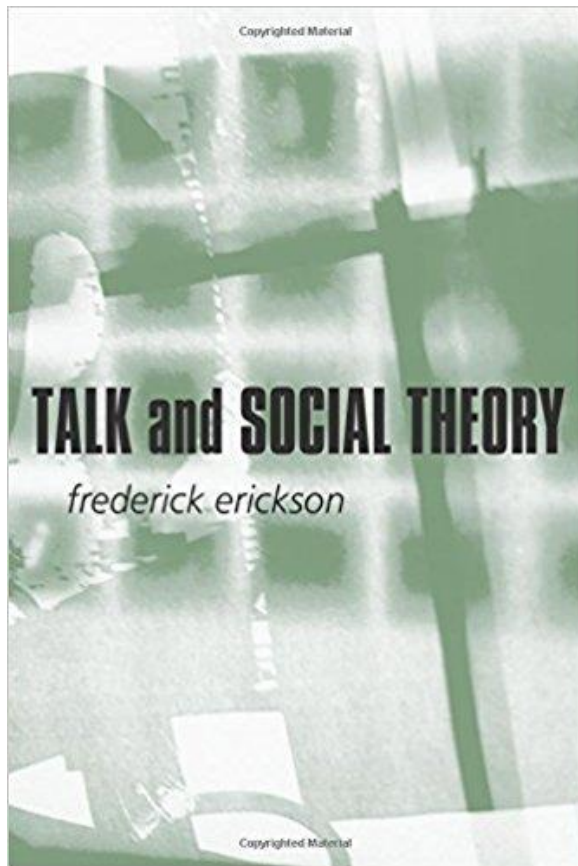
Overall that was the case, but there were exceptions—some intra-racial interviews did not go smoothly at all, and some inter-racial interviews seemed to go well, with advisor and student both expressing positive reactions to each other. For a while I was tempted to take the discrepant cases out of the analysis—but Jeff insisted that we keep thinking about it—and he was thus supporting the better angels of my nature as a researcher—actually deep down I too really wanted to struggle with this conundrum. Jeff stayed

there with me, all the way. What resulted was a new insight—yes, cultural differences in communication style could make for misunderstanding and negative treatment in institutional encounters—and that’s what happened quite often, all other things being equal. But all wasn’t equal—there was an intervening factor. Looking at the positive instances of inter-racial and inter-ethnic interaction we realized that as they talked the advisor and student had revealed similarities in background—that they were both knowledgeable about Catholic high school league sports scores, or that they had both gotten traffic tickets without having done anything wrong, or that

Deficit views and othering are powerful, but not totally powerful. That is perhaps the most important lesson I have learned.

they were both the youngest children in their families. We coined a term for this—situational co-membership. What invoking co-membership does is to humanize the person you are talking to—it’s grounds for solidarity in an “us” relationship rather than a “them” relationship. (See Erickson, 1975; Erickson & Shultz 1982) *Lessons learned:* always pay attention to discrepant cases, and try to learn with and from your students.

Conclusion. I’ve recounted here some things learned from experience concerning teaching, research, and academic disputation. In teaching I learned the importance of student assent to learn, and the power of students to withhold that assent. In research I learned the importance of being open to surprises and changes of mind, looking closely at all your evidence and not sweeping any of it under the rug. In academic disputation I learned about tribal isolation and siloing across disciplines in the field of education, and the difficult but important matter of trying to avoid “othering” those with whom you disagree. I also learned a great deal from my early experience in Lawndale, recognizing over time that in trying to help kids and adults



there I had received much more from them than I gave. Lessons learned in Lawndale have come back to me over and over again, in the now more than 50 years since I first went there to give free music lessons. Also being in the bottom reading group in first grade provided me with fellow feeling for students who are struggling in school, and appreciation for the importance of family social and cultural capital. I had that advantage as a child, but many children do not. It's no accident that later in life I gravitated to early grades classrooms as a scholar and practitioner in education, and to trying to make visible students' subjective experience of everyday life in those classrooms.

I have also been influenced by the ethical and spiritual teaching of Judaism and Christianity. The Hebrew Scriptures' emphasis on justice and respect for the poor and for the stranger, the notion of *tikkun olam* (the healing of creation—repairing broken-ness in both the bio-physical

environment and the social environment) and the continuation of those principles in Christian social teaching were foundational for me in my early work in Lawndale and in later teaching and research in education. Soon after I received the PhD, I began theological study toward ordination in the Episcopal Church as a permanent deacon, and was ordained in Boston in 1975. (Typically Episcopal deacons function as assisting ministers part time, without pay.) I have served in various congregations since, along with my academic work. At the university I never wore my clerical collar, nor did I ever teach religious doctrine there explicitly. But I've found that in doctoral thesis advising issues came up that have secular labels but also have spiritual implications—too much pride (asking too much of one's self) or too little self-confidence (not trusting one's self), and occasionally despair (ready to quit). The advice I gave to students then, in entirely secular terms, feels to me very much like what takes place in spiritual direction—as a scholar you need to be able to love yourself enough, but not too much. I used to conceive of my religious vocation and my academic one as separate, albeit on parallel tracks, but in later years I've come to realize that my critique of “deficit” characterizations and my critique of overdeterminism in social theory (a replay of the old “free will and necessity” argument) has deep roots in my religious formation.

An enduring issue throughout my career has been the power of deficit narratives in education. They don't go away. Deficit narratives de-humanize—sub-humanize. That's the orienting message of the new chapter on race, culture, and identity by Jennifer Langer-Osuna and Na'ilah Nasir that just appeared in the centennial edition of the Review of Educational Research (Langer-Osuna & Nasir, 2016) with the title “Re-humanizing the ‘Other.’” As a young man, by meeting

actual human beings in Lawndale as well as by marching in the streets of Chicago with Dr. King, I had learned to distrust the deficit narratives. Since then I've tried through my teaching and research to produce counter-narratives that challenge deficit assumptions, while not underestimating their persuasive power as uncritically accepted common sense.

And in studying gatekeeping in social interaction, my students and colleagues and I discovered that co-membership changes the frame of routine institutional encounters—it humanizes—providing ground for empathy and solidarity, an antidote for “othering.” (That’s what had been going on with Nate Gage

and myself in the doctor’s office in Palo Alto—we shared co-membership in being ill and in seeing the same physician.) Academic advisors, job interviewers, police, physicians, can establish co-membership in their interaction with clients, citizens, patients. Teachers can foster co-membership with and among students in their classrooms. This is to say that default patterns in social reproduction—domination and repression, micro-aggressions—are not inevitable—they can be interrupted. (For more extensive discussion on determinism and its discontents, the “free will and necessity” argument, see Erickson, 2004) Deficit views and othering are powerful, but not totally powerful. That is perhaps the most important lesson I have learned.

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About Acquired Wisdom

This collection began with an invitation to one of the editors, Sigmund Tobias, from Norman Shapiro a former colleague at the City College of New York (CCNY). Shapiro invited retired CCNY faculty members to prepare manuscripts describing what they learned during their College careers that could be of value to new appointees and former colleagues. It seemed to us that a project describing the experiences of internationally known and distinguished researchers in Educational Psychology and Educational Research would be of benefit to many colleagues, especially younger ones entering those disciplines. We decided to include senior scholars in the fields of adult learning and training because, although often neglected by educational researchers, their work is quite relevant to our fields and graduate students could find productive and gainful positions in that area.

Junior faculty and grad students in Educational Psychology, Educational Research, and related disciplines, could learn much from the experiences of senior researchers. Doctoral students are exposed to courses or seminars about history of the discipline as well as the field's overarching purposes and its important contributors. .

A second audience for this project include the practitioners and researchers in disciplines represented by the chapter authors. This audience could learn from the experiences of eminent researchers—how their experiences shaped their work, and what they see as their major contributions—and readers might relate their own work to that of the scholars. Authors were advised that they were free to organize their chapters as they saw fit, provided that their manuscripts contained these elements: 1) their perceived major contributions to the discipline, 2) major lessons learned during their careers, 3) their opinions about the personal and 4) situational factors (institutions and other affiliations, colleagues, advisors, and advisees) that stimulated their significant work.

We hope that the contributions of distinguished researchers receive the wide readership they deserve and serves as a resource to the future practitioners and researchers in these fields.



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