

# Classroom Materials as Spheres of Influence: Examining Institutional Influences on a Novice High School English Teacher



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## A BIT OF BACKGROUND

### PREVIOUS RESEARCH LEADS TO A QUESTION:

A great deal of research indicates that early-career high school English teachers are strongly influenced by their colleagues and school environment; often the influence of the school community is significantly greater than the influence of their preparation programs (Grossman, Valencia, Evans, Thompson, Martin, & Place, 2000; Johnson, Thompson, Smagorinsky, & Fry, 2003; Smagorinsky, Wright, Murphy Augustine, O'Donnell-Allen, & Konopak, 2007; Smagorinsky, Wilson, & Moore, 2011).

What these studies do not do, though, is respond to the following question:

### HOW DO INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS INFLUENCE EARLY-CAREER ENGLISH TEACHERS' WRITING INSTRUCTION PRACTICES?

This research explores the ways in which the school environment influences an early-career high school English teacher and finds that texts used in instruction are a strong source of influence.



### RESEARCH SITE



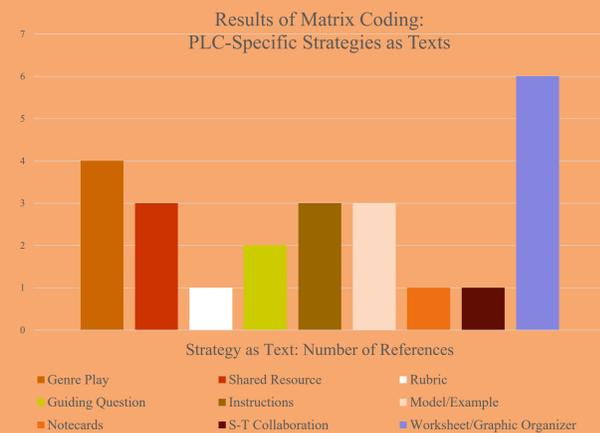
- Midwestern public high school
- Roughly 900 students
- 19% minority population
- Top 20% in state for reading/language arts proficiency
- Case Study Pseudonym: Gordon
- Second-year English teacher
- Single, young, white male
- Teaching 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades
- Graduate teacher preparation program

## FINDINGS: INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

### CO-CREATED TEXTS:

Of the 44 mentions of instructional strategies in 9<sup>th</sup>-grade professional learning community (PLC) meetings, 55 percent (n=24) related to creation and use of classroom materials.

From the shared strategies, fifteen categories of strategies emerged, and of these categories, 60 percent (n=9) were cross-coded with the institutional ethnographic category of influential texts. This data is represented in the chart at right.



## IMPLICATIONS

### TEXTS CREATE INSTRUCTION

In the observations of Gordon's classroom practices, it was obvious that texts of various types drive his instruction: slide decks display the agenda daily, necessary materials are shared digitally through Google Classroom and referenced in the slide decks, worksheets and graphic organizers guide student activity, and instructions and examples are often written as well as spoken throughout class. Although Gordon's use of guiding questions, circulation, and conferencing (among several other strategies) do not experience the same cross-coding with texts, the classroom materials are at the core of nearly all of the instruction.

### THE COMMUNITY CO-CREATES TEXTS

It is clear that the strong community-based institutional forces influencing Gordon's classroom practices revolve around the creation and use of texts for use in class based on three related findings:

- Much of the discussions in PLC meetings regarding instructional strategies revolves around the creation and use of classroom materials
- Gordon's classroom is deeply influenced by the texts he creates and uses
- The interview tracing the processes Gordon uses for creating those texts indicates that the most significant influence on his process is his school community

## METHODS & METHODOLOGY

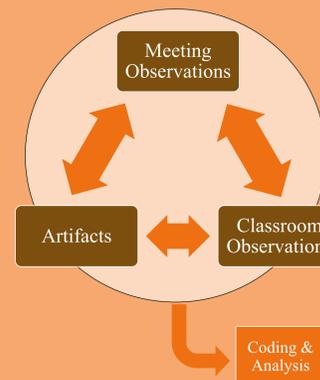
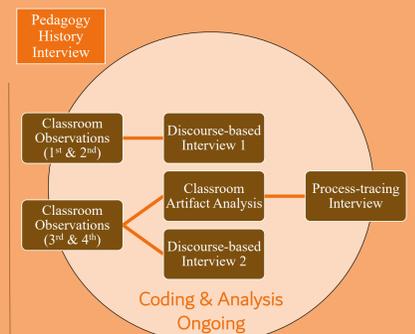
### METHODOLOGY:

Institutional ethnography is a theory of feminist research practice that seeks not to make generalizations about the community being investigated, but instead "to investigate how the individuals within a location co-create the dynamics and processes under investigation" (LaFrance, 2019, p. 5).

### METHODS:

This study begins with an institutional ethnography to determine generalized effects of the community on the practices within that community and then narrows to a case study of an early-career English teacher to determine the extent to which that influence affects his emerging classroom practices.

- Institutional Ethnography**
- Participant Observation:**
- Meeting observations (12)
  - Classroom observations (2)
- Artifact Analysis:**
- State standards
  - Course descriptions
  - Classroom materials



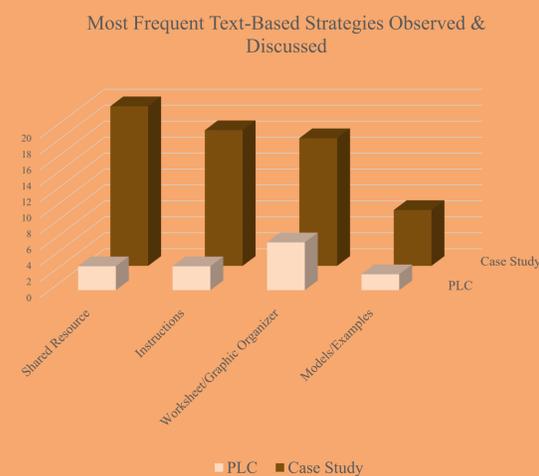
- Case Study:**
- Participant Observation:**
- Classroom observations (4)
- Artifact Analysis:**
- State standards
  - Classroom materials
- Interview:**
- Pedagogy history interview (1)
  - Process-tracing interview (1)
  - Discourse-based interviews (2)

## FINDINGS: CASE STUDY

### TEXTS IN PRACTICE:

Classroom materials strongly impact Gordon's practices in his classroom, and the process-tracing interview indicated that the community strongly influences creation and use of those texts. School-based influences (colleagues, standards/testing, students) comprised 95 percent (n=37) of the references coded for influence in the process-tracing interview.

This finding led to a similar cross-analysis of the coding of the classroom observations: of the nine PLC-specific strategies from the IE that coincided with texts, I observed five in Gordon's practices. Of those five, four were among the six text-based strategies he most often employed (two other text-based strategies also had seven references each).



## CONCLUSION

The initial findings of this study indicate that the strong influence by the school community on Gordon's instructional practices derives from community generation of texts for and discussion of their use in the classroom.