

**A Critique of Ann Berlack's "Teaching and Testimony: Witnessing and Bearing Witness to Racisms in Culturally Diverse Classrooms"**

**Rob Power  
MUN ID: 9236571**

**Education 6100: Research Designs and Methods in Education  
Assignment #2  
Date Posted: November 15, 2002**

## Table of Contents:

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>Page 2</b>
<b>Does Berlack Describe a Credible Source of Data? .....</b>	<b>Page 2</b>
<b>What is the Relationship Between Theory and Practice / Data in the Process of Analysis? .....</b>	<b>Page 4</b>
<b>Was Berlack Disciplined About Her Analysis? .....</b>	<b>Page 4</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>Page 5</b>

## Introduction

In “Teaching and Testimony: Witnessing and Bearing Witness to Racisms in Culturally Diverse Classrooms,” Ann Berlack (1999, *b*) sets out to determine why there are differences between the tension levels in two sections of a cultural and linguistic diversity course in each of two semesters, and why students from both sections of the second semester expressed greater satisfaction with the courses than did their counterparts from the previous semester. In an effort to understand these differences, Berlack undertakes a qualitative study in which she examines the composition of the courses, the types of responses given by students in the form of journal entries, and possible differences in her own teaching methods. As an example of a qualitative study, several questions are raised by Berlack’s report. Does she describe a credible source of data? What exactly are the relationships between theory and practice / data in the process of her analysis? And does Berlack’s description of how she arrived at her conclusions paint a picture of a disciplined analysis?

### Does Berlack Describe a Credible Source of Data?

Berlack’s report reveals a number of flaws in her attempt to acquire a credible source of data for her analysis. My first major concern lies with her choice of topic, and subjects for her research. Berlack makes the mistake of conducting research “in her own backyard” (Glesne, 1999, 25-42). While it is acceptable, to some degree, to conduct research in territory with which you are already familiar, doing so poses many risks. The first is the difficulty of looking at the territory, including its people, places, and events, objectively (Glesne, 1999, 25-42). Backyard research brings with it a much higher level of subjectivity, which the researcher may not easily be able to acknowledge, or account for during analysis and interpretation. Secondly, Berlack’s research involves her own teaching, and her students. This raises the question of her ability to separate her roles as teacher and researcher (Glesne, 1999, 25-42). It also raises concerns about the inherent imbalance of power between Berlack as a researcher, and her subjects, or others (Glesne, 1999, 25-42). Being in a position of academic authority over her students, it is more difficult for Berlack, as a researcher, to get at the heart of what is really going on in the hearts and minds of her others. It also poses difficulties for the researcher when later reflecting upon the significance of witnessed events, as she must reflect to a much greater degree upon her own

role in shaping those events, and she must be far more critical of her own role (Glesne, 1999, 25-42, 130-154).

The reflective nature of Berlack's study also raises concerns about the credibility of her sources of data. Berlack states that she undertook her analysis after the fact (Berlack, 1999, *b*). She began to wonder why certain conditions differed between certain sections of her cultural and linguistic diversity classes, and reflected upon the classroom interactions of students, as well as their responses in journal entries (Berlack, 1999, *b*). By doing this, Berlack sacrifices a wealth of opportunity to gather observations as events are occurring (Glesne, 1999, 43-93). She did not take field notes at the time (Glesne, 1999, 43-93). She did not analyze her observations at the time (Glesne, 1999, 43-93). She lost the opportunity to interview her research others, thus losing a wealth of information – and relegating these others to the role of subjects, as opposed to participants (Glesne, 1999, 43-93). Berlack is over-reliant upon a limited scope of observations, and loses much from the lack of analysis and coding that could have taken place had she begun the research while the classes were in session. She also loses out on the multitude of opportunities to explore and clarify certain observations, and to incorporate new observation techniques.

My final concern over the credibility of Berlack's data sources lies with the limited scope of her research (Glesne, 1999, 17-42). Berlack limits her examination to only four sections of the diversity course, and does not account for the conditions of, or differences between the many other sections she has apparently taught in other years (Berlack, 1999, *b*). She notes that her peers have had similar experiences with similar courses, but does not account for these experiences – nor avail of the opportunity to explore her research problems in a setting other than her own backyard (Berlack, 1999, *b*). And Berlack limits the theories she applies to her observations and analysis to only a few sources from related literature, thus narrowing the scope of her observational efforts, and failing to account for other possible theories for interpreting the phenomena under investigation (Glesne, 1999, 17-42).

### **What is the Relationship Between Theory and Practice / Data in the Process of Analysis?**

Berlack commits a number of errors when it comes to theory and the practices and data she uses in her process of analysis. The first of these is her own use of theory as a means to give

meaning to her practices and observations in the classroom (Glesne, 1999, 22-24). Berlack (1999, *b*) relies heavily upon the theories of erasure, witnessing, and bearing witness, as defined by Felman and Laub in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992). By so doing, she limits her process of analysis. She fails to look for alternative theories in related literature, and she fails to interact with her research others as equal participants, in an effort to negotiate meaning (Glesne, 1999, 43-93). Berlack's interpretation of her observations appears to be predefined as she enters the research process by the theories she has accepted from Felman and Laub (Glesne, 1999, 22-24). Berlack's reliance upon these theories also shapes the nature of her interactions with the students in her classes, curtailing their ability to negotiate meaning for themselves, or to express their own insights into the subject matter, and the significance of it (Glesne, 1999, 22-24, 43-93).

Berlack's process of observation is also flawed. Her reflections upon the observed data happen far after the fact, not on an ongoing basis as the data are being collected (Glesne, 1999, 130-154). Berlack also limits the types of data sources used, and fails to describe the variety of her reflective techniques. She does not demonstrate to practice of triangulation – the use of as wide a variety of techniques and data sources as possible in order to arrive at the greatest possible analysis and understanding of the significance of the data (Glesne, 1999, 31, 152). In short, Berlack misses a number of opportunities to expand the wealth of information at her disposal, and it appears that her understanding of the data is limited by views she brings with her, and imposes upon the research process and participants.

### **Was Berlack Disciplined about Her Analysis?**

*Teaching and Testimony: Witnessing and Bearing Witness to Racisms in Culturally Diverse Classrooms* (Berlack, 1999, *b*) does not appear to be the end result of careful and disciplined research and analysis. Berlack attempts to justify her process of analysis, and how she arrived at her conclusions. In her report (1999, *b*) she states that, according to the theories of erasure, witnessing and bearing witness, it is necessary to have a student in the class who is willing to bear witness to experiences of racism – both previous, and ongoing in the classroom – in order to create the feeling of uneasiness about the subject matter that she feels important to self-exploration amongst all students. But in reaching this conclusion, Berlack failed to interact with the research others to determine exactly what was going on in the classroom, and what the

significance of those events and relationships were (Glesne, 1999, 43-93). She appears to take an authoritative stance, having made up her mind about the validity of her primary theories (Glesne, 1999, 22-24). This authoritative stance may also have limited the types of interactions that took place in her classrooms (Glesne, 1999, 43-93). In her “Rejoinder to JoAnn Phillion,” Berlack (1999, *a*) defends her heavy reliance upon these theories, and criticizes Phillion (1999) for not being an experienced teacher – for being someone concerned too much with university research. All of these factors indicate that Berlack was not disciplined in her analysis. It appears that she considers her opinions authoritative, that she is unwilling to negotiate meaning in her research, and that she does not take the conventions of research, qualitative or otherwise, seriously. While Berlack’s subject matter is significant and relevant to the field of education today, her methods lead to questions of the credibility of her research, and findings.

### **References:**

- Berlack, Ann (1999). “Rejoinder to JoAnn Phillion.” *Curriculum Inquiry* 29, 1, 141-145.
- Berlack, Ann (1999). “Teaching and Testimony: Witnessing and Bearing Witness to Racisms in Culturally Diverse Classrooms.” *Curriculum Inquiry* 29, 1, 99-127.
- Glesne, Corrine (1999). *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. New York: Longman.
- Phillion, JoAnn (1999). “Narrative and Formalistic Approaches to the Study of Multiculturalism.” *Curriculum Inquiry* 29, 1, 129-140.