The Role of Ethnography in the Post-Process Writing Classroom

Jennifer Sinor and Michael Huston

Ethnography is a useful tool for producing the kind of knowledge that a post-process pedagogy argues is necessary for an empowering writing classroom: an awareness of the social situatedness of all acts and the realization that situation drastically affects communication.

All interpretations are provisional: they are made by positioned subjects who are prepared to know certain things and not others.

Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth*

Twenty years ago, the publication of *A Nation at Risk* sent the educational system reeling. Beginning with the Reagan years and continuing into the current Bush administration, reform has been the watchword in education. The recent Koret Report, a follow-up to *A Nation at Risk*, suggests that little improvement has been made, at least if measured by standardized test scores. But if we have learned nothing else in the last two decades, let us hope that we have come to understand the impossibility of adequately measuring something as individualized and complex as student learning with a standardized test. Learning, like the individual, is never standard or static. Rather it is multifaceted and fluid. All too often our testing, and even our teaching, ends up, as Alfie Kohn writes, “measuring what matters least” (1).

The teaching of writing is immune from neither the cries for reform nor a “solution” found in formulas or standards. One of the oft-cited and most troubling reasons given for “the rising tide of mediocrity” in education is the open classroom of the 1960s and 1970s, a classroom that, among other things, focused on the process of writing rather than the product. In response, standards have been imposed, the “basics” returned to. While such criticism of alternative methodology is clearly conservative and reactionary, teachers themselves saw the need to reassess the process approach. For example, work by Nancie Atwell and Lisa Delpit questioned the student-centered writing classroom

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Post-Process Theory

The process approach to writing partly emerged from the desire to encourage students to write the way “real” writers write. Early pioneers of the writing process movement, in particular those who approached writing cognitively, researched the steps real writers went through and then suggested that students work in a similar way. Researchers assumed that if students went through the same outward performances as “real” writers (the writing steps), then the students would go through the same mental processes as these writers and thus be able to produce similar products. Looking back, we now see that instead of capturing the “way” to write, what emerged was a still life or snapshot of what writing looks like, not a map of what writing actually is.

As a result, the process approach, as it is generally articulated in practice, takes the students from where they are and has them move through the same basic stages of writing, regardless of the writing task before them. In the most general sense, success in this type of process classroom lies in students’ ability to navigate the steps of writing by organizing their thoughts, getting them down on paper, and continually clarifying (improving) the assignment. In these classrooms, the focus of writing instruction becomes some version of the writing process rather than the shifting nature of language itself. For the student writer in such programs, it may appear that the tools of writing are “universal”—always applicable and always present.

But most writing instructors would probably agree that writing is much more complex than a series of stages would suggest. Writing instructors realize that no two writers engage in the same act of writing, even if, on the surface, they progress through outwardly similar stages of composition. Texts and contexts shift and change; we are not the same as we were yesterday and neither is the text that

and the inherent racism in progressive movements like process writing. It is probably accurate to say that most teachers now teach more of a hybrid strategy, resting somewhere in between the poles of process and product.

It should not be surprising, however, in an era of standardized testing and measurable outcomes, that what has been salvaged from the process movement is not the recursivity and flexibility envisioned by Donald Murray, Peter Elbow, James Moffett, and others but the stages of the process itself—a series of steps more closely resembling the rigors of product rather than the fluency heralded by process. Too often teaching writing is reduced to teaching steps—prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing—steps that are then plastered on large multicolored posters in secondary classrooms or practiced in first-year composition. When this happens, something dynamic and changing—the act of writing—is distilled into something that can be prescribed, measured, and assessed.
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Post-process theory revels in the instability and positionality of our postmodern world. If, as Thomas Kent suggests, “no codifiable or generalizable writing process exists or could exist,” then to write like “real” writers requires an approach that focuses attention on the context of writing, not simply the outward, visible processes of writing (1). No one formula can capture something as complex as the hermeneutic dance among writer, text, and context—the moving back and forth, the guessing—and so we need a different paradigm, one that offers a framework for examining the contextual, social aspects of writing. Post-process gives us this framework.

Post-process theory, as articulated by Kent and others in Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Writing-Process Paradigm, questions the limitations of the process approach to writing and asks us to turn our attention to the socially situated nature of writing itself. While the “post” in post-process appears to suggest that process writing must be abandoned, it is more helpful to think about post-process theory in terms of emphasis. Post-process does not throw out the writing steps; in fact, working through the writing steps is a crucial component of this approach. But rather than the steps themselves, instruction is centered on the social, political, and contextual forces that surround writing: it is less a question of how and more a question of why. Post-process theory revels in the instability and positionality of our postmodern world. Just as there is no single “truth,” there is no single process.

While post-process theorists resist being categorized collectively, most argue that in order for students to understand where they are going with a particular piece of writing, they must first understand the location and tradition of both writer and text. They must understand the context of each unique rhetorical situation. Where process emphasizes giving every student a set of seemingly “universalized” skills and having each of them work forward from where he or she is, post-process theory says that for students to work forward, no matter what the assignment, they must first foreground historical (recent and traditional) assumptions (personal and cultural) that dictate how writing works in the world. For those working in post-process, then, writing, and the teaching of writing, does not begin with brainstorming, but with the acknowledgement that “writers are never nowhere” (Kent, Introduction 3).

While the ideas behind this theory are intriguing, one of the criticisms of post-process theory is the lack of attention given to practice. In the collection of essays edited by Kent, none considers what the socially situated writing classroom actually looks like. How does one teach students that writing is grounded in a social context and that every act of writing, as David Russell suggests, “enacts a social process” (82)? It is much easier to teach students the writing steps and check to see that they have revised. If writing is to be transformational, students must be able to do more than mechanically reproduce what has come before. They must have the critical tools necessary to write for change, tools that adapt to multiple rhetorical situations and multiple writing needs.

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The Role of Ethnography

In the current scholarship several possible routes exist to help students look more carefully at the world around them and become more savvy consumers, thoughtful citizens, and sophisticated communicators. For example, Tom Romano’s work with multigenre writing asks students to pay attention to the conventions of genre, to move beyond expository writing and push against arbitrary boundaries. Composition scholars like Robert Root, Lynn Bloom, and Wendy Bishop are using creative nonfiction in the writing classroom to highlight the partiality of knowing. And service learning, led in part by the work of Bruce Herzberg and Ellen Cushman, asks students to reflect critically on their relationship with the community. In each of these areas, the contexts and social constructedness of genre, writing, and knowing are highlighted.

One of the most promising avenues for teaching students the situatedness of both writing and of the self is ethnography: a method of inquiry that involves describing a context as well as placing yourself in relation to that context. At its most basic level, ethnographic writing provides a window into another world. It involves close observation, thick description, and self-reflexivity. What makes ethnography potentially so valuable in the writing classroom is the role the ethnographer undertakes—that of participant-observer. An ethnographer is necessarily “engaged in numerous acts of interrogating the self at the same time as interrogating the other” (Jordan 41). Ethnographers consider what they are studying, place themselves in relation to that subject, and then attempt, in writing, to explain how the other and the self intersect. We would like to extend the kind of knowing that ethnographic work produces and consider how having students engage in amateur ethnographic practices will inform their understanding of writing as a contextualized and fundamentally social experience in which the backgrounds of the writer and of the text intersect every time pen is put to page.

Ethnographic work has long been associated with the writing classroom. Teacher-researchers like Mike Rose, Mary Krogness, and Janet Emig have demonstrated how an investigative question, good observation, and careful reflection can teach us a great deal about how students learn. But all too often in this work the teacher is the ethnographer and the students the subjects. While writing teachers value the knowledge acquired by ethnographic inquiry because it helps them better understand their students and student writing, we have failed to provide our students with the same analytical tools for making meaning. Fortunately, this is changing.

In the early 1990s, teachers and scholars began thinking about the use of ethnography in the writing classroom. Much of the attention given to ethnogra-
The connection between ethnography and student writing seemed, for many, to be obvious. In a 1991 article, William Wright suggested that ethnography “can give our students both a tool for inquiry and a responsible sense of their position as authorities in the writing process” (103). Students new to academic writing, he argued, wrestled with the questions of authority similar to the ones ethnographers, and scholars in general, were wrestling with: how do I know what I know? Having students read and write ethnographies, Wright suggested, would help them see how other writers negotiate authority.

In a very similar vein, in 1991 Eleanor Kutz proposed having students write ethnographies as a way to teach them how to handle authority. By learning to blend personal, critical, and cultural authority, she argued, they might avoid the common pitfalls of student writing: relying on unexamined assumptions or producing “hollow academese” (345). Around the same time, Howard Tinberg outlined the classroom practices composition teachers could undertake to teach their students the method of ethnographic inquiry. He proposed moving from a study of conventions, specifically how an individual uses language, to “an examination of a community’s social institutions and customs” (80). In each of these early attempts to marry ethnographic practice and the writing classroom, the emphasis was on how “all knowledge is marked by the context in which it is perceived and socially constructed” (Kutz 343). Ethnography seemed the perfect vehicle for teaching students the instability of writing and knowing.

And yet, little else has been written on the use of ethnography in the classroom, specifically on teaching students how to engage in ethnographic inquiry. Since the flurry of articles in the early 1990s, few articles address how and why teachers of writing might use ethnographic practice. It is difficult to understand this absence. After all, “ethnography involves the whole person,” as Shirley Ann Jordan writes in a recent article; ethnographies are “about the ways in which identities and cultural meanings—including those of the researcher—are constructed, maintained, modified and transformed within complex sets of power relations” (43). Students who learn to use the tools of the ethnographer learn not only to articulate context through close observation but also to question their participa-
Since the flurry of articles in the early 1990s, few articles address how and why teachers of writing might use ethnographic practice. Jordan points out, writing ethnography requires writing multiple kinds of texts: field notes, journals, expository writing, personal experience, description, and imaginative writing (43). Students learn various kinds of writing that call on various kinds of knowledge, from the personal to the critical. In sum, ethnographic writing is an ideal approach for foregrounding the situation of writer, genre, and context.

Perhaps the hesitation in using ethnographic methods in the writing classroom stems from the fact that very few teachers are ethnographers themselves. Fortunately, though, Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater and Bonnie Sunstein’s book, FieldWorking: Reading and Writing Research, addresses this concern, providing a guide for both students and teachers. It is a great introduction for any teacher considering the use of ethnography in the classroom, not only because of its detail but also for the way it effectively combines ethnographic theory with information about writing. In addition, the authors’ goal is not to make students into professional ethnographers, a point that is important for those teachers who might feel themselves unprepared to teach ethnographic practice. Rather, they focus on giving students some of the tools of the discipline, tools that, we argue below, fit constructively with achieving the goals of the post-process classroom.

Maybe the hesitation to use ethnography in the classroom is less about confidence and more about method. What does it look like? What is the experience for students like? What can be expected? In theory, ethnography may be appealing, as may be the goals of post-process. But how do these ideas translate into practice? To partly address these concerns, we want to spend time considering the tools and the outcomes of ethnographic writing.

**Three Tools of the Ethnographer**

The tools of the ethnographer are the very tools that foreground the past-tense aspects of writing and encourage students to develop critical awareness of the world and their role in it. Through ethnography, students become aware of how members of a group define themselves through artifacts, gestures, discourse, and dress. They see how individuals mark themselves as members of groups (e.g., a sorority, the middle class, or the MTV generation), how different practices and beliefs afford them different opportunities (i.e., body piercings may bring clout within punk circles but will make getting a job at the local bank difficult), and how affiliation with these groups affects how they observe the world around them. With this set of skills, then, students are prepared to examine the contexts surrounding all acts—from the act of writing to the acts of speaking, thinking, dressing, moving, and being. They are prepared to begin to see writing not as an isolated event performed by moving through a series of steps but as only one strand in a very large and
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As a window into another world, ethnography is a study of the local. It is a qualitative practice that relies on case studies of individuals rather than a quantitative practice requiring large databases. The ethnographer gathers information through interviews, observations, and artifacts. As Margaret Finders and Richard Beach outline in their article, “Students as Ethnographers: Guiding Alternative Research Projects,” a student who is for the first time engaging in ethnographic work might choose a group or event to observe—homecoming, a writer’s group, or a group of Thursday afternoon basketball players. Even when the context is seemingly familiar, like the locker room, the ethnographer’s task is to make the familiar strange. Because the focus is on the specific, ethnographers are actively working to move beyond stereotypes and generalizations. Developing the skills of close observation, vivid description, and reflective interviewing allows students to create what anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls “thick description”—evidence that persuades by its specificity and richness.

Additionally, ethnographic practice requires that students place themselves within the frame of analysis. As both participants and observers, they are part of the field, not apart from the field. The ethnographer is responsible for her or his ways of watching, noting, thinking, and knowing, which requires developing the tool of reflexivity. Reflexivity simply means that the writer is equally an object of study, that a writer must name the screens through which he or she is viewing the world. Students work toward reflexivity by keeping double-entry notebooks (see Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein for examples) and by practicing reflective writing. They can also read examples of professional ethnographers who position themselves in relation to their texts. In short, ethnographic practice requires students to consider their own contexts (their prejudices, assumptions, and limitations) by examining their relationship to what they are studying.

Finally, ethnography teaches students the skills of ethical representation—in other words, how to represent another’s experience while paying attention to one’s own. Being an ethical observer requires that students unearth their prejudices and assumptions by asking how those prejudices and assumptions limit and aid what they can see. When students leave the field and begin writing down what they have learned in the form of an ethnography, they confront—quite literally on the page—the intersection between their way of viewing and another’s. They make decisions about what evidence to use, what to leave out, and see how such decisions change both their subject and their text. In addition, unlike traditional writing subjects, their subjects can speak back. When students share their ethnographies with those they have studied, they experience both the power and the limitations of represen-
particularly for students who struggle with English or with academic discourse, the realization that discourses are constructed and that communities and texts are made can be transformational. Teachers can begin helping students learn to be ethical writers and observers by focusing on the transcription of dialect, the importance of words, and the selection of details. Teachers can also point to the gaps between what is observed and what can be expressed in writing.

In the movement to the page, students become responsible for merging the context being studied with their own personal contexts. Ethical representation requires that students name how the complexity of the world gets reduced in writing and how, as writers, they are responsible for what makes it to the page. Bringing these issues to the forefront of discussion allows students in the post-process classroom to question other texts as they see how little their own has been able to capture. They see how each act of writing is affected by the writer’s experience from the earliest stages to publishing a draft.

**Ethnography in the Classroom**

The move for students from the belief that they are sponges to the recognition that they are filters occurs easily in ethnographic work. What so often begins as an examination of an “other” quickly becomes an examination of self. Particularly for students who struggle with English or with academic discourse, the realization that discourses are constructed and that communities and texts are made can be transformational.

Julie Hagemann, in “A Bridge from Home to School: Helping Working Class Students Acquire School Literacy,” details a series of ethnographic assignments that allow struggling students to investigate oral language use. She relies on the ethnographic practices of observation and interview to help students make overt comparisons between the oral discourses of home and school. An understanding of the difference between these discourses allows her students to see that language use is flexible, not fixed. She highlights the fact that we always speak from a specific location and that location influences the words that we choose to use and the way we choose to speak those words. Through their ethnographic work, her students became aware of the dynamic relationship between culture and language use. Ethnography proves to be a useful tool for producing the kind of knowledge that a post-process pedagogy argues is necessary for an empowering writing classroom: an awareness of the social situatedness of all acts and the realization that situation drastically affects communication.

By way of a more extended example, Bill, a student in a recent course on the teaching of writing, decided to investigate the home literacy practices of his nephew. His assumptions going into the project were that his nephew’s highly
literate home life would provide a model for other families whose home literacies did not correlate with school literacies. Initially, for Bill, school failure could be addressed by changes at home. To investigate the context of his nephew’s literacy practices, Bill interviewed his nephew and his nephew’s mother several times, observed how the family practiced literacy, read background material on home/school literacies, and collected artifacts made by his nephew in school (writings and drawings complete with comments from the teacher). Many of these artifacts were included in the final version of his paper. In addition, he researched the work of literacy scholars and sociolinguists like Denny Taylor and James Gee.

Bill began working from the assumption that his nephew would have an easy time bridging the gap between home and school because school discourse would be no different from home discourse. As he moved deeper into his research, however, Bill began to realize that the home and school discourses were not as similar as they appeared. His nephew’s family was actually not “competent at teaching necessary literacy skills” to close the “gap” between home and school. He watched his nephew play games with his family and read books, but what he discovered was that, while his nephew’s family related “literacy skills to real life,” the school took “an approach to literacy that often relieve[d] on the decontextualized skills of reading and writing.” As evidence of the literacies practiced and valued by the school, Bill included several assignments that his nephew completed, assignments that asked for isolated knowledge like rewriting words or filling in the blanks. What appeared to be seamless—the movement from home to school—was actually a fissure that produced tension and frustration for his nephew. At one point, his nephew, typically a confident and articulate boy, wrote in a journal entry that he was a “hunk of lunk.” In fact, there was so total a disconnect between the literacies valued and practiced at home and those required by the school that ultimately his nephew was taken completely out of school and schooled at home.

Initially, Bill was thrown by what he observed. He found it difficult to understand how a confident and highly literate student like his nephew would have so much trouble in school. He began to wonder how anyone made the movement between discourses. To understand his nephew’s position, Bill was pushed to consider what it must be like for a young child to confront the powerful discourse of school. Reflexivity forced Bill to consider the relationship between primary discourses in his own experience and how they intersected with powerful secondary discourses. Asked by his professor to find a way to connect with his nephew, Bill began to draw a comparison between his experience in Marine boot camp, and the difficulties he had learning a military discourse, with his nephew’s experience of school. He spent several pages of his final ethnography reliving scenes from boot camp, recounting the conversations, the dressings-down, the fears, the time with his “band of brothers.” He remembered the urge to die, the humiliation, and the exhaustion. He wrote, “Everything I [thought] I [knew] about myself [was] reconsidered, reexamined, and revised.”

Bill’s use of the word “revision” is particularly illuminating, as it points to his understanding that selves are constantly changing and that such changes are
inextricably related to language. In seeing how he had to remake himself in the Marines, Bill began to understand what students must experience in the “boot-camp-like” classroom. He wrote, “When I, as a Marine recruit, failed to meet the expectations of the drill instructors, the result was often catastrophic. They wanted so badly for me to acquire the Marine Corps way of doing things that it frustrated them to the point of anger and violence when I failed to do something correctly. The same can be said of school teachers.” In fact, the drills he went through as a soldier seem little different from the drills his nephew goes through in the classroom.

It was only when he wrote about the violent experience of boot camp that Bill realized that, regardless of home preparation, children face “similar obstacles when moving from their home environment to school.” He wrote that “while the transition may not be physically violent, it nevertheless becomes rough and at times mentally violent for the young student. Even for children who have been exposed to print [literacies], the transition can be difficult.” He concluded that “the fault lies with the school and the way educators attempt to help students acquire the academic discourse, not with [the student’s] primary discourses.”

To address this problem and help teachers avoid labeling “the students or the students’ parents as literacy-deficient,” in his ethnography Bill turned to the importance of meaningful activities in the classroom as articulated in the work of Denny Taylor. He wrote that it is “the job of the teachers to incorporate activities that appeal to the students’ primary discourses and build on them but still engage in the socially prescribed instruction of the school’s discourse.” He then suggested several activities that teachers might try, including writing journals, using dialect, and sharing personal experiences. These activities, he suggested, are “based on the idea that students bring valuable knowledge and experiences from their community.” While his conclusions are not radical to the field of literacy research, they are to Bill. He began by wanting to change how families practice literacy and ended up in the classroom asking how teachers can bridge the gap between home and school. What he learned by intersecting his own experiences with the examined context of another was nothing short of how language use requires rewriting the self.

Ethnography gave Bill the tools to examine the dynamic relationship between home and school discourses. By paying attention to the particular, he found larger patterns in the culture of school. By interrogating the assumptions and experiences he brought into the field, he could understand the distance one must travel to learn a new discourse. By writing about his findings, he came to a conclusion that was the opposite of where he had begun. Bill became aware that for his nephew to be successful in school he would have to learn the new “language” of school; in other words, Bill realized that how one communicates depends completely on the situation in which one is communicating. But more than this, Bill became aware of how different situations affected his own ways of communicating. He became aware of the social context of communication, and of writing in particular, in ways that no amount of library research or drafting would ever have achieved.
Post-Process and Ethnography

Only when students see that writing is always a dynamic relationship between text (and its context) and writer can they succeed in critically negotiating their world. Ethnographic practice provides students with tools that are portable not because they can be applied “without adjustment” to any writing situation (as the writing process so often is), but because ethnography explicitly teaches that they must adjust to each new act of writing/viewing, merging the context of an event, group, or genre with their own personal contexts as writers.

Through ethnographic research, writers learn to name and understand the context of the writing task at hand. Ethnography gives students these tools by teaching them to notice and to document the particular through extended observation, field notes, journal entries, and descriptive writing. They begin to “read” the limits and possibilities provided by particular genres, assignments, or writing tasks. Ethnography also teaches writers to identify the experiences and prejudices that they bring to bear on that genre or task. In order to produce their ethnographic work students must be able to identify how their past experiences limit and aid their observation. Foregrounding past experiences and assumptions (social and personal) and recognizing the relationship that writers have with any communicative act are key parts of a post-process classroom. Finally, ethnography teaches students to be responsible for their ways of viewing and knowing through ethical representation. This sort of frank discussion about the social situatedness of writing/knowing is one of the most valuable outcomes of using ethnography in the classroom. When students are able to notice and then account for ways of writing, knowing, and being, they have truly been empowered.

If we want students to write the way “real” writers write, we need to provide them with more than just the tools to brainstorm or revise. We need to provide them with the tools to examine any rhetorical situation, identify the social forces in play, and respond appropriately in writing. Such an approach does not mean we must abandon process writing—Bill was able to produce his ethnography through brainstorming, conferring with peers, and revising—but the “how” is no longer the center of the writing classroom. The steps used to draft his paper are secondary to the critical inquiry his writing task fosters. Writing tasks are made meaningful because students place themselves in relation to the task, not because the task is intrinsically “authentic.”

Ethnography is just one of many ways to make this shift. What we like about ethnography is its emphasis on how a viewer/writer comes to understand a subject/text. The ethnographic projects we envision become more and more locally focused, so that by the end of the year students are digging in their own
backyards. Through detailed observation, reflexivity, and ethical representation, a viewer/writer becomes accountable for “what is” as well as for “what has come before.” With ethnography it is impossible to consider a task, an individual, or a culture without paying attention to all that surrounds whatever it is that we study.

Ultimately, ethnographic practice teaches students more about their own ways of thinking, being, and knowing than it does about others’. Students realize, through their own study, that different communities have different discourses and different ways of being, and so become conscious of their personal community and way of being. By having critiquing the “meta-elements” of another community, they also begin to develop the skills needed to critique their own ideologies, beliefs, and opinions. At this point, armed with the ability to recognize context and location and to assess it critically, students can work toward making changes in their world.

As teachers we must help students discover how writing functions in society and the social context that surrounds all acts of communication, including writing. Post-process reminds us that classes should not talk just about how to write but “about writing” itself (Petraglia 63). We must spend time making explicit (and allowing students to explore) the social context of writing, how each genre is a social act, how society influences what kind of writing is privileged and why, and how power influences writing and communication. In other words, we have to become “much more interested in the ecology in which writing takes place than in the mere fact that writing is the outcome of a variety of steps and stages” (Petraglia 63).

Notes

1. Marcy Young traces the evolution of Nancie Atwell’s approach to writing in her article, “Nancie Atwell’s In the Middle and the Ongoing Transformation of the Writing Workshop.” See also Lisa Delpit’s “Skills and Dilemmas of a Progressive Black Educator” in Other People’s Children.

2. For an overview of early cognitive approaches to writing see Cognitive Processes in Writing, edited by Lee W. Gregg and Erwin R. Steinberg.

3. Relying on Geertz, William Wright defines “thick description” as an “attention to context” (103), emphasizing the point that observation never occurs outside a context, and that the ethnographer’s job is to make that context as “thick” and rich as possible. Geertz defines “thick description” most fully in Chapters 1 and 15 of his Interpretation of Cultures.

Works Cited


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Jennifer Sinor is an assistant professor of English at Utah State University. Michael Huston is a student teacher at Sky View High School in Smithfield, Utah.