Teachers and Researchers: Roles and Relationships

This article and the responses to it by Susan Florio-Ruane and Carl Bereiter are based on addresses given at the American Educational Research Association Conference in 1988.

We are both teachers and researchers of writing, and interested in how those two kinds of work—teaching and research—are related, both conceptually and in practice. We therefore were delighted when the AERA Special Interest Group on Language Development suggested that a paper on relationships between research on the teaching of writing done by teachers and that done by researchers would be a useful stimulus for discussion. We were further delighted when Susan Florio-Ruane and Carl Bereiter agreed to respond to our ideas. (1)

"Knowledge in Use" and How It Is Changed

In "Philosophy of Research on Teaching," Fenstermacher (1986) argues for a particular relationship between research on teaching and the practice of teaching—a relationship that is based on his conceptualization of the nature of "knowledge in use," and of how that knowledge may be changed.

According to Fenstermacher, teachers’ knowledge in use has the form of practical arguments—with premises in the form of assertions about educational goals, how pupils learn, what means are effective with particular pupils, and so forth—that justify

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a concluding statement about action to be taken. “When it is argued that research has benefit for practice, the criterion of benefit should be the improvement of these practical arguments. [Evidence from research can] initiate the process of modifying the premises of the practical argument in the mind of the teacher” (Fenstermacher, pp. 44, 53), though alone it cannot determine any particular course of action.

To see in more detail how evidence from research can play this role, consider Bateson’s distinction between two ways of perfecting adaptive action: learning from feedback and learning by recalibration (1979, pp. 195-202; Bateson & Bateson, 1987, pp. 42-49). His most familiar example contrasts the two mechanisms of control in a home heating system: one (using feedback) that turns the furnace off and on, moment to moment, in response to information about a deviation from a preset standard; the other that recalibrates that standard when the householders are dissatisfied with the resulting temperature control over some period of time.

Bateson’s most detailed example is from a less familiar domain: learning to hunt with a rifle (using feedback) vs. a shotgun (by means of recalibration). Evidently, with a rifle, the hunter looks down the sight, corrects his aim, corrects his overcorrection, and shoots only when receiving information that he is on target. “The only relevant information is the error of the immediate moment. He does not need to change himself” (Bateson, 1979, p. 200, emphasis in the original). With a shotgun, by contrast, aiming and firing is a single act, and the hunter cannot afford a second glance. Here the knowledge available for learning depends on information from repeated performances, from carrying forward information about previous actions and outcomes and “ideally... information about the difference between what happened” in subsequent rounds (p. 200, emphasis in the original).

Bateson’s third example is closest to teaching: how a policeman decides which drivers to stop for violations of rules of the road. Leaving aside matters of equal treatment under the law, a policeman could use his moment-to-moment judgment about when a driver was driving so as to endanger others, based on intuitive response to speed or other features of a particular car’s performance in particular traffic conditions. More realistically, the policeman’s actions are calibrated by instructions that in turn are influenced by pressures from the rising price of oil or research evidence on a general relationship between speed and accidents. In all three examples, the critical distinction is between (a) using feedback only from the action in progress and (b) integrating knowledge about a set of similar actions under varied conditions.

In the best case scenario, a teacher uses both learning modes. She has calibrated her approach to classroom situations over years of teaching, accumulating what Schon (1983) calls exemplars—tacitly understood representations of past actions that comprise her intuitive knowledge about how to teach. But she also receives feedback on what is happening at the moment, gauges what is possible in the particular circumstance and makes instantaneous adjustments, and so alters and adds to her repertoire of intuited knowledge about what works and when. She both gets immediate feedback that influences how she conducts her lesson plans for the day and recalibrates the unconscious patterning of past learning each time she performs in class. That’s the ideal.

In the more likely case, the teacher gets feedback on the success of a particular strategy, but not on her body of knowledge about teaching and learning that calibrates those strategies. For a teacher, just getting feedback about how to preserve a steady state in the variable conditions of practice is infinitely more complex than the dichotomous on/off of the thermostat. And recalibration in Bateson’s terms, or changing the premises of her practical argument in Fenstermacher’s terms, is a more complex process than in any of Bateson’s examples.

Teacher Research on Writing

A review of four recent edited volumes, all published in 1987, provides a glimpse of what teacher research is about (Naso, 1988). The studies originated at three in-service teacher education sites: the Bread Loaf School of English (Goswami & Stillman, 1987), Northeastern University’s Summer Institute on Writing (Bissex & Bullock, 1987); and the Northern Virginia Writing Project (Mohr & MacLean, 1987; Research in Writing, 1987). In the four publications of these sites, there are thirty-six teacher research accounts (plus three proposals and one report of a teacher/researcher collaboration).

There is no reason to conclude that these reports represent all current teacher research. Each of these “home” groups may emphasize certain topics or particular approaches to research. Nevertheless, three of these publications are the most available collections of teacher research reports, and so will
influence how others understand the areas of teacher research concern and its perceived benefits. (2)

With respect to overall focus, the thirty-six reports are almost evenly divided into two categories. In some, the teacher's intention seems to be to solve a problem or test out a new teaching idea. For example, Victoria Holmsten (in Goswami & Stillman) asks whether microcomputers improve writing in her high school English class. In others, there is a more open-ended orientation toward research, in which the teacher follows and describes learners or classroom events. For example, Carol Avery (in Bissex & Bullock) provides a detailed case study of a learning disabled child.

Specific topics can be grouped into three categories. Two-thirds of the studies address familiar questions of learning and teaching composition—such as teacher-student conferences and the role of revision. In Mohr & MacLean, Betsy Sanford reports that her fourth-grade students seemed not to apply the "body of revision skills" she had taught them. Seven of the studies focus on the use of writing to explore meaning. In Research in Writing, Bernadette Glaze Mulholland discusses the use of learning logs in her tenth-grade humanities class. Four studies are about student reports in other content areas. For example, also in Research in Writing, Judy Christian, an elementary school librarian, studied the movement from personal writing to informational writing as students prepared reports about ancient Rome.

With respect to research findings, or what appear to be the main points the teacher author derives from the study, the reports again fall almost evenly into two categories. In about half, the authors emphasize their deeper and clearer understanding of learning, the use of classroom time, or the needs of their students. For example, in Goswami & Stillman, Gail Martin explains her changed thinking about the writing apprehension she observed among her Arapaho students. And in Bissex & Bullock, Susan Kaplan considers how close attention to her own learning benefits her teaching. Other reports conclude with the author's highlighting the effects of particular classroom practices or arguing that a certain teaching approach really works. So Avery's case study of the learning disabled child ends with a strong statement of the advantages of placing Traci in a "writing process" classroom.

Aside from these differences in focus, topic, and findings, we notice differences among teacher-researchers in their reporting style. The following questions represent some of the decisions teacher-researchers seem to make about how to report their work.

Does the report highlight insights primarily about learning and teaching or about changes in the teacher-researcher? The narrative form is prevalent in teacher research reports forces writers to assume roles in their own stories. As a feature of ethnographic writing more generally, this is controversial; first-person narration can shift readers' attention inappropriately from the world as observed to the observer's experience. But in the case of teacher

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**Editor's Note**

I know there are no final drafts, but reality is both a harsh and pragmatic foil to that knowledge—publication deadlines are empirically testable and a writer's patience for revision has its sensible limits. I think that the process we experience as writing teachers and researchers falls in parallel with this familiar irony, for as we engage in the ever-evolving process of refining theories and redefining ourselves and our goals, we fix on circumscriptions in order to achieve the business of the day—the classroom lesson, the research project, the administrative task. As with writing, it is this daily doing that invigorates and renews the evolutionary churning. Two concerns that seem to be evolving palpably in the writing profession form the core of this issue of The Quarterly—one is teacher research in writing; the other is writing assessment. To enact each of these, we fix on definitions of what they are and what they are to achieve, yet enactment fuels dialogue, and so we continue to reshape and redefine our premises and our ends.

Courtney Cazden, Judy Diamondstone, and Paul Naso illustrate this process when they ponder the roles and relationships of university researchers and teacher researchers, showing how teacher research as well as university research are evolving constructs that work in concert with daily enactments. In separate responses to their ideas, Susan Florio-Ruane and Carl Bereiter reshape and redefine Cazden, Diamondstone, and Naso—and the dialogue comes full circle. Charles Cooper and Beth Breneman discuss a major writing assessment project in California, the fruit of much research, much changed thought about the reason for and goals of writing assessment, yet the project they describe swirls in the eddy of evolving theory and so is not a final, but the latest enactment of a process to which the authors continually contribute, along with cadres of writing teachers and researchers.

In this issue also, H. Fil Dowling, Jr., reports on Towson State University's writing-across-the-curriculum consortium, which evolves side by side with the Maryland Writing Project. Dixie Dellingler reviews Jim Moffett's Storm in the Mountain, and Harold Nelson reviews Steve Tollefson's Grammar Grams. We wish you happy reading!

—M.S.

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research, self-reflection is an important part of the product. As is the case with any research report, teacher-researchers have to decide how much to write in terms of ideas and theories, and how much to "write in terms of people" (Murray, 1982, p. 105). As a group, teacher research decisions on this issue may be different from that of researcher research.

How do teacher research writers hope to affect their teacher readers? Teacher research reports may emphasize theory and urge readers to be more receptive to innovative theories of writing instruction. Or they may emphasize changes in the author's own thinking and invite readers to reflect on the choices they make in their own classrooms. The first emphasis treats teacher research reports more as one-way presentations, whereas the second is closer to North's depiction of practitioner story telling as "reciprocal: an exchange, a duet, not a solo; and sometimes, though not always, a dialogue" (1987, p. 32).

Does the report present findings as provisional answers or as "what works"? There are explicit or implicit messages in teacher research reports about the extent to which the authors understand their knowledge to be provisional, and themselves "unfinished" as teachers. For example, teachers who believe in the "writing process" approach can use their findings to confirm their prior beliefs, or to raise new questions about writing instruction.

We suspect that if researcher research work were examined for answers to this last question, that work would also be frequently presented as testimonials to the originating theory rather than as provisional conclusions in a continuing search. But there may be special contextual influences pressing teacher research in this direction. Many of the teachers who are doing this research find themselves members of an isolated and embattled minority within their school district and even within their own school; and their research efforts in part validate their classroom practices in the face of pressures to revert to more reductionist methods and materials for teaching language arts and English.

Researcher Research on Writing

Given this valuable teacher research activity, we suggest three roles for researcher research work: as another source of information for teachers to take into account in recalibrating their practical arguments; as a medium for negotiating among teachers (individually or in groups) whose practical arguments about how best to teach writing to particular students are in conflict; and as collaborative partners in the research process.

As an alternative source of information

Considering the potential benefit of teacher research as a mechanism for bringing first to awareness and then to critical reflection a teacher's practical arguments, we see researcher research as providing important additional contributions to the same process. Someone else's research or theory can change practice in much the same way that insights taken from the teacher's own practice do. But instead of limiting the context of learning to the teacher's own situation, researcher research can provide a sample of situations and observations that is enlarged in number and, even more importantly, in kind.

Descriptions and theories about writing processes and products produced by cognitive psychologists, sociolinguists, and experts in other disciplines can—when they are not offered as prescriptions—amplify the practitioner's ability to gain new perspectives on what she knows and to reconceptualize/recalibrate the foundations of her practice. John Elliott (1985) writes of the importance of both kinds of knowledge for teachers:

If teachers continue to relegate their own insights to the status of private rather than public knowledge, and cling to the view that the latter is the domain of specialist researchers, they will never build that common stock of practical wisdom which is the mark of a professional group. (p. 259)

The teacher who develops his or her theories solely from reflection upon experience, in ignorance of past and present deliberations of others, will simply "reinvent the wheel" rather than push beyond the existing state of professional knowledge. Although it could be argued that this is sufficient for the profes-

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sional development of individual teachers, it is not... sufficient for the development of the teaching profession generally through action research. (p. 254)

Claims by researcher research that top-down transmission of new ideas is the only path seem as parochial as the opposite bottom-up claims by teacher research that teachers can improve practice more effectively by themselves.

Whether it is important which comes first—learning from one’s own inquiry or from exposure to the inquiries of others—is not clear. Advocates of teacher research (e.g., Richmond, 1984) often argue that engaging in it helps to make ideas from other peoples’ research more usable in rethinking the teacher’s own practice. We need more longitudinal case studies of teacher change; and we need biographies of both influential and inert ideas—where they were generated and, for the influential ones, how they spread.

On this view, there is no one preferred kind of researcher research work. Specifically, we do not agree with Bolster (1983) that ethnographic research is more useful for teachers because the rich narrative descriptions that it produces are closer to the teacher’s more familiar ways of seeing.

The impact of the research initiated by Charles Read (1971) on the surprisingly sophisticated patterns in young children’s “invented spelling” is a case in point. The product of purely linguistic analyses of young children’s texts, this research was picked up through some communication system (that itself deserves description), verified by a few teachers’ own inquiries (e.g., Giacobbe, 1981) and became an important research-based premise in the new practical argument that first grade children can write from the first day in school.

As a medium for negotiating among conflicting practical arguments

Disagreement among teachers about how best to teach writing can be an important stimulus to further knowledge and improved practice. But this will happen only if the disagreement is faced and research planned that can show which methods work for which objectives with which students.

For example, in two articles (1986, 1989), Delpit argues that the “writing process” movement originated among white practitioners with predominantly white students and fails to meet the needs of black and other minority student writers who need more explicit teaching of conventions of syntax and style. This practical argument, held not only by Delpit but by other minority teachers whose responses to her first article she quotes in the second, deserves respect and careful consideration. It raises at least two questions. First, just what variation does exist in “writing process” classrooms on this aspect of teaching? Second, in the face of conflicting practices and practical arguments, what is the evidence about which strategies are most effective with minority students? Researcher research work, carefully planned with teachers who hold different views, should be able to help in answering these questions.

As active collaboration with teachers

Calls for more collaboration between members of the teacher research and researcher research groups are frequent these days—in the UK, for example, by John Richmood, an adviser for the Inner London Education Authority and co-editor of a British book of teacher research reports, Becoming Our Own Experts (1982), as well as here. And reports of successful collaboration are available—e.g., teacher Amanda Branscombe and researcher Shirley Heath on letter writing among high school students (reported by Branscombe in Goswami & Stillman) and teacher Leslee Reed with researchers Jana Staton and Joy Peyton on dialogue journals (Staton et al., 1988).

But differences in the priority given to questions—between lived experience vs. underlying structures, or between shorter and longer range time frames—can prevent members of either group from work they care most about. And differences in perceived status can also create interpersonal problems for such collaboration, despite the best of intentions on both sides.

In Conclusion

We are impressed with the variety of ways in which the roles of teaching and research are distributed in the writing field: divided between individuals working separately or collaboratively; or united in a single person who commutes between worlds or combines both kinds of work in responsibility to a single group of students. Perhaps it is one of the special strengths of writing as a curriculum field today that these variations are all contributing to the improvement of both our understanding and our practice.

Notes

1. For a discussion of the broader teacher research field, including but not limited to writing, see the Harvard Education Newsletter, August, 1988.

2. At least at Bread Loaf, research is being recommended as a valuable activity for students as well as teachers. “Working with teachers to answer real questions provides students with
intrinsic motivation for talking, reading, and writing, and has the potential for helping them achieve mature language skills” (Preface to Goswami & Stillman). Here too, examples exist. Heath and Branscombe collaborated with one of Branscombe’s former students, Charlene Thomas (1986) over the language development of her young child; and Schwartz (1988) reports teacher-student collaborative research on the exchange of writing between two classrooms on an electronic network.

References


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