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Research, Recalibration, and Conversation: A Response to Cazden, Diamondstone, and Naso

I would like to begin with the idea that research—in this case on the teaching of writing—helps teachers to recalibrate their thinking and transform their action. This idea is considerably more complex than the common sense assumption that practice is routinized and responsive to change simply on the basis of moment-to-moment feedback. Though this assumption is to some extent the case, there is far more involved in practice than routines and feedback. Because of the complexity of practice, research has the potential to make a difference in how teachers think about and proceed with their work.

Central to Cazden, Diamondstone, and Naso's paper is the idea that changes in the premises of teachers' practical arguments can be brought about by teachers' engagement in research. While the authors acknowledge that the concept of "practical arguments" (Fenstermacher, 1986) is controversial, they proceed from that idea to Bateson's very powerful metaphor of "recalibration"—changes in "the unconscious patterning of past learning" derived from thought and action. I will return in the conclusion of my paper to the idea of practical arguments as a way of understanding teacher thinking.

That Cazden, Diamondstone, and Naso selected research on the teaching of writing as the domain in which to examine the idea of recalibration is probably not accidental. Their report of teacher research on writing in the United States parallels John Elliot's (1988) description of teacher research on the Humanities in Great Britain. In each case, teacher research seems to arise out of efforts to reform existing curricula or to specify a curriculum where one has been ill-defined. Another such example is the Michigan State University Written Literacy Forum of which I was a part from 1981-1987. There we found that writing was rich territory for teachers' research and curricular reform efforts. Writing in the schools we studied was the least constrained part of the school curriculum. It had few school district mandates or purchased materials, and teachers, therefore, had the mixed blessing of creating their own curriculum. Research on new and existing practices enabled them in this effort (Florio-Ruane & Dunn, 1987).

In the United States, contemporary teacher research on writing has not arisen independently from research within the university. Research on the teaching of elementary school writing was generously funded by the National Institute of Education in the 1970s, and many requests for proposals required researchers to demonstrate that teachers would be involved in their work in a variety of collaborative roles. In addition, teacher education movements such as the National Writing Project supported teachers' inquiry into their own writing and teaching practices. Finally, the popular "process approach" to writing captured the imaginations of both teachers looking to fill the curricular void and researchers interested in the cognitive processes underlying text production.

Despite the proliferation of research on writing and its instruction by both teachers and university researchers, however, the writing curriculum remains underspecified and underconceptualized. This point has been made elsewhere (Applebee, 1986; Florio-Ruane & Lensmire, in press), but Cazden and her co-authors underscore this point with examples of the kinds of questions being asked by teacher-researchers. Teachers use research, in part, to try to figure out what should be taught, why it should be taught, and how they can teach it.

As Cazden, Diamondstone, and Naso demonstrate, some of the most interesting of these questions are being pursued, not by university-based researchers, but by teacher-researchers. One teacher whose work is described in one of the published reports they cite is Kathleen Hogan. She is studying the dilemma of topic selection in freshman composition. She asks in this regard when a teacher-assigned topic pushes students to expect more of themselves than self-chosen topics do (Hogan, 1987). On the related matter of response to writing, Ferguson McKay, another teacher whose work is published in the same report, is researching writing conferences as instructional talk and wondering just how it is that students learn complex cognitive processes like revision by means of conversational give and take. McKay is interested.
in contrasting the functions of “direct instruction” with “encouragement” in those conferences (McKay, 1987). Delpit, cited by Cazden and her co-authors, describes teacher researchers who raised difficult questions about language instruction and policy. Her work suggests that assumptions made about student and teacher norms, values, and background knowledge underlying the process approach to writing might reflect only those of the dominant social group. This possibility is reminiscent of Basil Bernstein’s (1977) critique of open education. Bernstein suggested that in the open education movement, the ordinary norms of schooling had not, in fact, been changed. They had simply gone “underground.” Now made even less explicit—yet still assumed by teachers—the norms organizing schooling were even less accessible to those students whose outside school experience did not prepare them for school’s norms. It may be that practitioners need to raise such questions about the writing process movement because it leaves open to discussion by teachers and students alike the normative and instructional nature of talk about text in school.

The Multiple Uses of Teacher Research

A key idea developed in Cazden, Diamondstone, and Naso’s paper concerns the variety of ways research can help teachers recalibrate their understandings of practice. It is notable that most of the instances of recalibration that the authors refer to would not be possible if there were not occasions and forums for communicating teacher research. Sufficient published teacher research exists for the authors to have conducted a review and classification of it. They have been able to identify important features of the research and show variation within it. This published research also forms a body of literature for teachers to read and share. Moreover, it can serve to influence not only teaching practice and teacher research, but the research agendas of universities and funding agencies. Finally, the findings of teacher research, once they have entered the body of published knowledge, are available for wide discussion, scrutiny, and debate.

Cazden, Diamondstone, and Naso demonstrate that teachers participate in research in numerous ways. In fact, their examples make university-based researchers’ views of dissemination or knowledge utilization seem modest at best and anemic at worst. According to the authors, teachers inquire into their own practices. They also change their practices and monitor the effects of those changes. They deliberate about practice with others using a variety of studies to negotiate among possible instructional and curricular alternatives. They also collaborate with university researchers. In all cases, research seems lively and connected to teachers’ work.

In these varied uses of research there are promises and pitfalls, and the authors bring many of them to light. They stress the freshness of teacher research in which new knowledge and insight are often reported in first person and narrative. The authors also make the intriguing observation that teachers learn not only (or not necessarily best) from studies of the familiar, but from studies of the strange. In making this point, the authors take issue with popular claims that the ethnographic case study or the self-report of practice might be the optimum type of practitioner research.

Because schools and schooling are familiar and a great deal of their social and academic order is invisible to us, even good ethnographic research must strive to “make the familiar strange.” Cazden, Diamondstone, and Naso prompt us to think about the value of altering our perspective, or interrupting our usual ways of thinking or acting, as essential to recalibration. With this idea in hand, one might learn from experiments, surveys, interviews, case studies of others’ teaching, cases written from a child’s perspective, and so forth. One exciting example that Cazden and her co-authors mention is the linguistic research on invented spelling by Read, C. Chomsky, and others (e.g., Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). In my own work, I have witnessed the way this research transforms beginning and experienced teachers’ interpretations of young children’s texts, their thoughts about meaning, and their sense of instructional response precisely because it takes the familiar, that is, children’s written work, and places it in new relief. Teachers begin to see errors not as mistakes to be laboriously corrected, but as clues to children’s emergent development (Fiorio-Ruane, 1988).

Research can be both familiar and strange—it can start with very routine and ordinary concerns and open doors to vastly new ways of thinking about practice. Elliot (1988), for example, describes teachers who began a study of “wait time” trying to stretch the time they would give students to think and answer questions during discussion. This study led to teachers’ reconceptualizing classroom dialogue entirely. As Cazden and her co-authors have said, in the best instances, “a teacher uses both learning modes”—feedback and recalibration. It is likely that teacher-initiated studies interweave these, sometimes beginning with instructional behavior and working toward broader and deeper issues of pedagogy. It is exciting to think about how university researchers could design studies which would serve the same purpose and speak more meaningfully to teaching and teachers.

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Cazden (1988) has elsewhere referred to recalibration in other terms. She discusses the need to override the “default” mode when teaching—the need to interrupt our usual tendencies to make sense of what is happening only in particular culturally-patterned ways. This interruption slows down the swiftness of instruction and pupil assessment and adds more time to think. But it also opens up the possibility of having new thoughts about what is happening—teaching’s interpretive frames can be broken by research (both of the teacher and the researcher brand). For example:

- teachers take time out from the flow of events to think and rethink them;
- teachers collect information from their practice to view repeatedly in the “empty classroom” (children’s work samples, photographs, videotapes and audiotapes);
- teachers engage in dialogue and deliberation about parts of teaching that might have become routinized during years of practice;
- teachers subject their knowledge to scrutiny and change—they become more skeptical about the answers to pedagogical questions deriving from either research or common sense.

All of these activities are part of the inquiry process whether undertaken by a teacher or a social scientist. As Cazden, Diamondstone, and Naso illustrate, Betsy Sanford studied an ordinary practical problem of application of revision skills which were to be learned from teacher feedback during writing conferences. But, during the research process, her attention shifted. She began to study not the application of teacher-taught skills, but the process of student problem-solving during composition.

Kathleen Hogan’s aforementioned study challenged the assumptions of many process-oriented writing researchers about the desirability of student topic selection. She wondered in her inquiry when it makes instructional sense to permit students to select their own topics and when it does not. Similarly, Ferguson McKay wondered about the differences between direct instruction and encouragement in writing conferences. These teachers are conducting research which may extend or transform their own work and that of university-based researchers as well. Everyone’s practice needs recalibration.

The Social Organization of Teacher Research—and Some Thoughts on Practical Arguments

I want to close my response to Cazden, Diamondstone, and Naso’s paper with some thoughts about contemplation, conversation, and knowledge use on what the authors call the “battlefield of curricular reform.” Teacher research, as the authors assert, can be lonely and risky (especially in the United States, where the individual teacher and not the school faculty tends to be the research unit). Teachers who take part in research may see themselves as marginal or alienated from colleagues. The teacher-researcher movement may unhealthily (and unwittingly) encourage isolation from peers to the extent that teachers work with university researchers rather than with one another. In addition, it is hard to create and institutionalize new and enduring social forms—or forums—for teachers to work together or for groups of teachers and university-based researchers to form coalitions. Devaluing of teachers’ knowledge and ways of representing it may isolate teachers from social scientists, administrators, and policy-makers. Given this state of affairs (which is driven by and supportive of stratification in the education field), teachers’ research may be pressed to reify uncritically the prescriptive claims of university researchers.

Interestingly, the authors adopt at the outset of their paper a “practical argument” view of teacher thought and action which may intensify some of these problems. One of the few but fundamental difficulties I find in their paper is that their rich portrayal of teacher research—its content, purposes, and usefulness—does not map well onto their initial premise. The authors begin by embracing Fenstermacher’s idea that teachers operate from practical arguments. Upon this claim they build the idea that changes in the premises of teachers’ practical arguments (and hence in their practice) can be brought about by engagement in research. In my view, the idea that practical action emanates from practical arguments grossly oversimplifies practice and research.

As critics of Fenstermacher’s view have noted, “argumentation” may, in fact, be a misleading or inappropriate metaphor for the discursive process by which problems are framed and action taken. In addition, practical reasoning seems to assume the utility of knowledge. That assumption may well exaggerate the authority or correctness of social science knowledge. The idea that practical arguments lead directly to action seems to leave out the contemplative dimension of teaching. Not all thought can or should lead to practical action—particularly in areas where our knowledge is uncertain, our goals are not clearly specified, means/ends relationships are difficult to fix, there may be competing goods among which we must choose, and our professional judg-

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In my view, show that teacher decision-making can, indeed, be recalibrated. But the teacher decision-making they describe is decidedly richer and more complex than can be captured by ideas of argumentation or knowledge utilization.

Buchmann (1988) proposes several images I find more useful to a consideration of thinking. She suggests contemplation as an integral part of practice; pursuit of knowledge that is tentative (that is, research as a way to challenge certainty and look beyond that taken-for-granted); and conversation as a way to share and use that research. Contemplation is appealing because it slows down or interrupts the thought/action connection and admits of new information and alternative action. Conversation is appealing because, unlike argumentation, it stresses knowledge’s tentative nature and the multiple kinds of knowledge that go into complex teacher decisions (“argument” is a discourse form in which the object is to win rather than to exchange, and, presumably, the knowledge claim that wins is thought to be “authoritative”). These three ideas—that teaching is not only active, but contemplative; that conversation rather than argument is the appropriate mode for deliberating and communicating about research; and that knowledge must be pursued rigorously but also taken as tentative—are interrelated. They seem true to the spirit of Cazden, Diamondstone, and Naso’s paper in that they stress appropriate social forms for knowledge exchange, time to consider one’s actions, and the importance of interrupting ordinary ways of thinking by means of research.

References


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