Marian Mohr with Judy Grumbacher, Carin Hauser, Gretchen Mathews, and Karen Willoughby

Teacher-Researchers: Their Voices, Their Continued Stories

It fills my bookcases, stored and labeled in three-ring binders or arranged in various file folders under various labels, and now it begins to fill up disks. It grows. A note from a teacher-researcher friend tells of something he or she is doing and instead of being able to view it as a friendly message, I will, with permission, record it, file it. It is part of someone’s continued story.

This “it,” a friendly alien, is the collected data from teacher-researchers I have known. My data live with me, an intimate mass of information in which variables seem to generate boisterously while nuances are elusive. Yet I continue to collect—correspondence, newly published articles, notes on telephone conversations, notes from meetings where I am invited as an observer at long-established teacher-researcher projects, my log recordings and comments on conversations with colleagues whom I see daily or weekly, gleanings read or told to me from other teacher-researchers’ logs now into their second or third study, and of course my own tattered papers—my life and my logs.

In these papers I notice a change. The teacher-researcher term is now jargon, whole conferences are devoted to the topic. RFP’s arrive from the federal government as well as NCTE, university researchers and professional teachers of teachers approach the subject paternally and maternally and people teach teacher-researchers how to do their work who have never been teacher-researchers themselves. Teacher-researchers criticize each other and warn about the dangers of having less than rigorous work done in the name of research. We have arrived as a phenomenon; attention is being paid.

I worry that, while being much talked about, teacher-researchers will themselves disappear. We will become stages in someone else’s development scale. We will be segregated to special categories reserved for teacher-researchers. We will become token professionals in the larger world of research. We will become molded to fit established ambitions, Ph.D. program research, for example.

The courage it demands to insist that your own observations of your work are no more hampered by preconceived notions and assumptions than those of an outsider-observer is hard to sustain. The classroom is a critical environment where confidence is regularly shaken. More importantly, the lack of support in the form of released time and reward for research, writing, and publishing, means that a teacher-researcher must tend to his or her own needs for response and recognition. Of course teachers have traditionally done this, but not with the added burden of self-scrutiny that teacher-researchers regularly carry.

The problem is larger even than that of analyzing Godzilla. How is it possible to present the data, how to have the voices heard without distortion? Perhaps this question represents the researcher’s ultimate evasion, the chase through the city streets as the alien, friendly, not understanding its own strength, reaches out for a smothering embrace—my analogy collapses. The data form not into a theory, but into a series of individual stories; not into patterns, but into people.

What follow are the voices of experienced teacher-researchers. They are speaking to a large audience of teachers of all grade levels attending a conference on language and learning. My remarks were prepared for this same forum. Together we were trying to uncover, analyze, and explain what happens to teacher-researchers as they work.
Carin Hauser, Forest Edge Elementary School, Fairfax County, VA:

My first teacher-researcher project started with questions I had about my third graders and how, when, and why they revised their writing. I was curious also about the role I played as I conferred with them, and why some of these youngsters revised, while some of them did not, or at least appeared not to revise. . . .

An exciting advantage I have over outside researchers is that my perceptions, observations, and intuition are all firmly grounded in the context of my classroom. That is also a difficulty of teacher research. It's hard to look dispassionately at something that you're in the middle of. So I find that my research journal, like an anthropologist's field notes, becomes very important in helping me figure out what is really going on.

In one research study, I looked at what happens when my students write about their reading. That study started out of conflict—my students wouldn't write in their reading logs—they didn't at first seem to think the assignment was important. But I found that my students were very willing collaborators as we figured out together how to use the logs in our literature studies. They explained and reexplained what they thought of the reading logs when I interviewed them. They wanted to be sure I got things down right as I wrote their responses to my questions in my research journal.

Collaboration extends beyond the walls of my classroom to working with other teacher-researchers. It's wonderful not to be isolated and to be in touch with other teachers who are committed to looking in depth at what is really going on in their classrooms. That helps me stay connected to my profession and actually strengthens my commitment to teaching. My research groups have helped me look at the data I gather and make sense of it. I guess you could say they keep me honest.

This year I feel very lucky. We at Forest Edge Elementary School have a group of teacher-researchers all at one school. That has been a dream of mine for quite some time. Several of us are looking at questions involving assessment in reading and writing. Like my other projects, this one starts with a problem—how can I involve my students in assessment, so that they can internalize the process? Perhaps my research question will be something like "What happens when students assess their own progress in reading and writing? What words do they use to describe their work?" I'm not sure yet what form this study will take.

Research is a little bit like writing—sometimes you're not sure where you're going when you start.

Gretchen Mathews, Frost Intermediate School, Fairfax County:

There's an old wives' tale that warns us to be careful what we wish for because we might get it. When I first began researching my eighth grade students' reading and writing processes, I "wished" that I could figure out why the use of reader response logs seemed to work so well in my classroom. I found out that they did indeed work well, but I made a few other discoveries in the process. In a sense I got what I wished for.

Students responded to what they had read with an honesty I had not anticipated. I had carefully chosen short stories of literary merit that I thought would appeal to them, stories with adolescent heroes who were "coming of age." They called them "relationships" stories and explained in their reader responses why these stories did not appeal to them, using all the literary terms and elementary critical approaches we had talked about. The responses emphasized a troubling paradox. My students liked to read, but they didn't like to read literature, or at least what I considered literature. My student Heather pretty much summed up the class's ideal novel: "about a boy who meets a girl in the future and they solve mysteries together using a lot of science and then get married." Another spoke for the rest of the students about English stories when she wrote, "I got to thinking there had to be more to this story than I thought. After all we were reading this story in English, weren't we?" There was a definite difference between reading and "reading in English."

Reviewing my research log and data, I decided that what my reader response log process needed was student choices about what they read. But I knew that they were apprehensive (some terrified) about sharing those choices with their peers, and

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that the choices they made would not include classical or significant modern literature.

Luck found me, believe it or not, in the way of Stephen King. I thought of him as a consumer author, one that I wanted students to get away from. But I couldn't dismiss the fact that his writing spoke to so many students in a way that the stories I had chosen did not. While writing our first paper, an experience-based monologue, my students kept telling me about the movie *Stand by Me*, based on *The Body*, a novella by Stephen King, because of its similarity to the paper we were writing. I gave a bonus assignment to write a response to the movie or the book.

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Many of the responses referred back to the "relationships" stories. One student wrote: "*Stand By Me* is like *Marigolds* in the way that the main characters were both torn between acting immature like everyone else or acting in a mature, cool way...both pretty much hit on the same theme, growing up." Another student wrote that it was "the kind of movie that got you thinking about things you really don't think of, like life and death and the meaning of it all. This story was one which makes me want to write a book and make a movie on my experiences as a child to share with the world."

I immediately saw the movie, and a kid in my class brought me a copy of the book. They were right. I saw what they saw—the agelessness representation of the problems of growing up in its glory and its pain. I was those kids. My kids were those kids. Stephen King had taught me something, and I *shared* this discovery with the kids. We had connected.

Through my research, I am becoming more and more convinced that the secret of teaching students to enjoy reading and to appreciate literature lies in the teacher's ability to become a reader and response writer among her students, a *pupil* who respects their choices and offers an encouraging ear to their ideas.

**Judy Grumbacher, Falls Church High School, Fairfax County:**

One of the things physics students have difficulty with is solving problems. While it is possible to do a lot of physics without doing mathematical calculations, at some point it becomes necessary to solve problems, which is, after all, what physicists do. I began teacher research by looking at what successful problem-solvers do differently—besides getting correct answers—than less successful problem solvers. Initially I hoped that I'd find some magic bullet. I'd find out what the good ones did and teach the poorer students to do the same thing.

I had some difficulty beginning classroom research because I thought of research in a narrow, experimentally-based way. Asking questions like, "What happens when students write to learn physics?" seemed to me, at first, to lack the rigor of science. My data didn't fit into neat charts the way physical data do. Rather, they consisted mostly of my teaching log and my students' logs and papers. Somewhere, somehow during the first year of classroom research I discovered the wisdom of Yogi Berra's remark, "you can see a lot just by looking." When I started looking, I saw that successful problem-solvers used their logs to think aloud on paper, to explore approaches to a problem, to wrestle with the ideas of physics contained within the numbers. Less successful students' logs were mostly numbers, with little explanation of where the numbers came from and why they were manipulated the way they were.

As a result of my initial encounter with teacher research, I have changed the way I look at my teaching and educational research. I've always read research and tried to teach according to research findings. The difference now is that instead of looking only at educational research done by expert outsiders that may or may not be what my students need, I also look within—to ask what's working in my classes and what isn't. My focus and method of inquiry have shifted. I ask myself why it's important to me and to my students to learn certain things. When I can't answer that question, then I know that I have to revise what I'm teaching.

Looking over this year's teaching log, I found questions like:

*Is this the year I'll truly have the courage of my convictions?*  

*Is it unreasonable to expect kids to do this?*  

*Why is it important that kids do this assignment?*  

*Why do I give a damn about unit conversions?* (a question my students also had)  

Teacher research has forced me to change the way I look at classroom disruptions:

*There's a good bit of talking going on. What to do? Let it go or stop it now? I think I'll keep writing and discuss it tomorrow. I think they may actually be talking about*
physics because I just heard someone use the phrase “initial velocity.”

Teacher research has also changed the way I do things in my classroom:

Time to slow down—I feel like I’m racing—trying to do too much, cram too much in. So slow down and relax and give the kids a chance to do the same.

I don’t always find answers to the questions I have about what’s happening in my classes. But what has happened is that I’m learning to look for answers within my classroom, to trust the expertise of my students and colleagues and to use that knowledge to explore ways of teaching and learning physics.

Karen Willoughby, Resource Teacher in Science and Writing, Fairfax County Schools:

Several years ago I was in the middle of explaining a writing assignment to my fourth graders. There was no prewriting or any actual teaching of writing, just the assignment written on the board: “How I Spent My Weekend.” My students were expected to use dictionaries to look up unfamiliar words as they wrote their stories. I never mentioned the word “draft.” The first attempt was the final one and was turned in to me for a grade.

My students’ reactions were no different from those of other students in other years: they balked, with loud moans and groans, about writing. “Why?” they asked, “Why do we have to write about that? How long does it have to be?” I didn’t have a convincing answer to make the writing task more palatable. But when I allowed them to “have their own way,” they wrote beyond their experience; the writing was dull and had no substance.

In those early years I don’t remember much of why I assigned what I did.

With enthusiasm, though, I targeted writing because it had been difficult for me in school. I spent many hours reading and wondering why Brian wrote one run-on sentence after another following an unbelievable plot line, or why Sharon couldn’t stretch beyond three-word sentences.

Frustrated and tired of floundering on my own, I enrolled in a class to learn how to teach the process of writing to my students. That course led to an intensive summer writing institute followed by a teacher-researcher seminar. With each experience I grew to understand more about myself as a learner and a teacher.

An outgrowth of this whole process was my reflection about my overlapping career paths—nursing and teaching. There are many parallels. Being an effective listener, an astute observer, and a thorough data collector are the first steps in caring for a patient and teaching a student. The picture is not complete without the involvement of patients in the care plan or students in the lesson plan. Both depend upon interviewing techniques, careful documentation of information, and subsequent interpretations. The “Aha” for me was realizing that my training as a nurse could be useful in my teaching.

Another outgrowth of being a teacher-researcher was what the students taught me. I learned how to be student-directed instead of teacher-centered. I wanted to develop students’ critical thinking skills while having them write across the curriculum. I implemented this by asking students to respond, in journals, to my questions. I discovered that just asking questions alone wasn’t the solution. Rather, what I did in reaction to their answers, in the form of lesson planning, was key.

I also learned more about how I could do better instructionally than ever before. This came only after months of having students write definitions.

The “Aha” for me was realizing that my training as a nurse could be useful in my teaching. Without benefit of dictionaries and write opinions without checking to see what others thought first. Initially they were paralyzed with the fear of not being right, so it was difficult for them to be honest in their writing. The experience taught me how personalized teaching could be without being overwhelming. When my reaction to their writing was non-judgmental, they learned to write more about what they thought and learned and less about what they thought I wanted.

When students asked for my help with an instructional or classroom problem, I realized the power of listening for their voices. I had gradually removed many of the reasons students were inhibited when asked to “talk on paper.”

Just as I listened to patients and learned to listen as carefully to my students, I now have transferred that skill to the teachers I work with in my present job as a resource teacher.

When I go into a class, I have a general idea of what I plan to do, but it’s the unique interaction between the students and myself that ultimately causes me to revise. So I model this flexibility for other teachers. I further model the process by interviewing, listening to what the teachers say, observing, and assessing how they processes information. I show them the importance of being a question-asker when things are not working as well in their classrooms as they would like. I demonstrate the methods I used to collect data and interpret it, helping teachers to trust their observations and to use them for planning and assessment.

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message on the screen, "Disk Full," increased writer-frustration. Still, the load lightened when kids had a computer to swear at.

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We are not, in the end, as hopeless as I had thought. Of the fifteen students who began the year with me, ten have scored high enough on the ninth-grade writing test to move, next year, into Regular English. I do not know if the computer caused this success; I do attribute much of their new-found confidence to their work with the computers. Unlike past years, this year's class wrote more on the ninth-grade writing sample. So off they go, no crutches, looking for all the world—and writing—just like everybody else.

Today, May 1, I preface our computer day with, "In two weeks I want a piece from each of you I can put on the wall. It can be a piece you've already written or revised, or it can be a brand new one that you started today. Your piece will go up on the wall along with the writing from my other classes."

"No problem," says Jesse.

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Jane Juska teaches English at Ignacio Valley High School in Concord, California. She is a Teacher Consultant with the Bay Area Writing Project.

**NWP NEWS**

The South Coast Writing Project (SCWriP) has been selected to represent the California Writing Project as part of a state-funded California Technology Project (CTP), resulting from a grant awarded to the California State University system.

SCWriP will: a) gather data on CWP technology use, resources, and training capacity; b) develop model materials that will encourage and facilitate the inclusion of technology training into CWP activities; c) disseminate those materials; d) provide regular contributions to the CTP journal/newsletter; and e) serve as liaison between the CWP and the CTP Advisory Board.

Stephen Marcus, who directs SCWriP's Computer-Using Fellows (CUF) activities and SCWriP's Advanced Computer Institute/HyperCard Project, will be directing this new effort.

The Wyoming Conference on English will be held on June 19-23, 1989 in Laramie, Wyoming. The conference theme is "Margins of Overlap: Schools, Communities, and Cultures." For further information, call or write Tilly Warnock, English Department, University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY 82071. 307-766-5140.

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As I listen to these voices again, it seems less necessary to define them and their work, but I begin to think about what they have in common.

1. They question. They ask questions that they don’t know the answers to, questions that go to the heart of learning and teaching, questions that they find impossible to stop asking as one leads to another in a dizzying process.

2. They doubt. They keep asking, “What’s happened?” They are a combination of self-doubt and pride, and the tension between the two energizes and tires them. They are interested in the moves of change.

3. They see understanding as a move toward change. They observe a distancing from their teaching yet at the same time an intimacy. They have trained themselves to do this.

4. Their search and their analysis of what they find inform their teaching. They don’t teach just because it’s fun. They teach in order to understand. As they teach and research, they show their students how someone learns and the whole class becomes a group of researchers.

Eventually this list will be more solid. It will be in columns or explained by a classification code. It will be exhaustive. And someone else will probably have written it. As Hauser, Mathews, Grumbacher, and Willoughby have made clear, it is the nature of the teacher-researcher role to continue questioning; the time for reflecting and analyzing is precious little and hard to come by.

Perhaps it doesn’t matter whether the data on teachers as researchers pile up unanalyzed so long as their voices continue to be heard. They do not need to be “empowered” or explained by others in order to continue their work. Perhaps it is also the nature of teacher-researchers, just as they take it upon themselves to understand their students’ learning, to take it upon themselves to explain their own.

Marian Mohr teaches at Hayfield Secondary School in Fairfax County, Virginia. She is co-director of the Northern Virginia Writing Project, where the authors who contributed to this article are teacher-researchers. Gretchen Mathews' research article appears in VITAL SIGNS: Experiencing Literature, James L. Collins, editor. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Boynton Cook, in press.