Jeff Wilhelm: You Gotta BE a Teacher-Researcher

by Ruth Devlin

Finding a quiet place to talk in the middle of the National Writing Project Annual Meeting in Atlanta was no easy task—certainly not as easy as I'd imagined. But Jeff Wilhelm—author, teacher, NWP colleague—had graciously agreed to talk with me, so I was determined we'd find a spot. Wilhelm is the featured author for the upcoming NWP Authors and Issues Online Conference, March 13-28, 2003, which is being sponsored by the NWP Teacher Inquiry Communities (TIC) Network. This will be the fourth conference in the Authors and Issues Online Conference series and the second sponsored by the TIC Network.

We cruised the multiple levels of the Atlanta Hyatt Regency's meeting rooms, finally landing in the hotel's cavernous ballroom, which hours earlier had been packed with hundreds of teachers attending the annual meeting's general session. Wilhelm had agreed to share his insights on teacher research and his plans for the TIC Network's online event, and I had questions ready for him. But any reservations I had had about getting enough material for an article were quickly dispelled as Wilhelm began talking animatedly about his life as a teacher, learner, and teacher-researcher.

Wilhelm's background covers a broad expanse of educational experience, including seven years as a high school English teacher and six years as a middle school reading teacher at the University of Maine for the last eight years, he has served as an associate professor of literacy education and has become involved with the school's professional development network, which allows him to remain in the schools working with teachers and students. He is also the director of both the University of Maine Writing Project and the Maine Technology for Teachers Institute.

Wilhelm's first teacher-research study began in the middle school where he taught reading/language arts to students who were labeled "ED, LD, ESL, and ADHD."* Although these students were in the "exceptional educational needs house" of his school, Wilhelm believes that all teachers have kids like these in their classrooms; some students just haven't been given the labels. His struggles with these students moved Wilhelm to begin looking at "what expert readers and engaged learners do and how resistant learners or unengaged readers might be helped to do the same thing." What he learned about interventions that worked with unengaged readers found its way into the book "You Gotta BE the Book": Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading with Adolescents (Teachers College Press, 1996), which he co-wrote with Michael W. Smith.

Teacher research, Wilhelm clearly believes, follows a question that has arisen out of classroom practice: a problem, an issue, a nagging concern—usually something that's right in a teacher's face. His personal engagement in teacher research flows naturally because it is "totally contextualized in the fabric of [his] life." That's especially important, he notes, emphasizing that teacher research cannot be something extra that teachers do. It has to be a natural part of everyday teaching. If it is an add-on, Wilhelm warns, busy teachers won't do it; they're just too busy to add on even one more thing. Wilhelm finds that teachers can do their jobs "better and more efficiently and faster by becoming reflective practitioners who do teacher research." Being involved in teacher research helps teachers teach what they teach better.

When asked for suggestions for teachers who want to get started with teacher research, Wilhelm instantly suggested writing.

"Write down all your questions," he responded. "Write about the things that bug you, that are bothering you; the things that are keeping you awake at night or keeping you in the shower a little bit longer."

Wilhelm also suggested "reflecting afterward about something that happened and trying to explore it." To set this reflective process in motion for himself, he picks a critical incident—"something that went really well, or something that went really wrong"—and examines it: "Why did that happen? What caused that to happen? How might I get that to happen again or keep it from happening again?" Although many of these suggestions are things that good teachers already do, by adding some teacher research tools, it all becomes easier and natural.

Wilhelm's energetic personality, professional knowledge, and practical experience make him a natural for the TIC Network Authors and Issues online event. And it is easy to imagine his ideas unfolding, becoming the center of an online discussion, creating a community. Wilhelm sees the online conference as a great way to build community: "I think a lot of times in schools we close our doors, and we kill our own snakes. And we might not have people in our school who we trust, or who can help us... and so that's a nice thing about an online community. You have people who may be several states away who are thinking about the same things you are, who might be able to offer you an angle or advice." The conference will, by its asynchronous nature, allow participants to "think about what's been said, and kind of turn it over, and then respond later." He would encourage those who choose to read and not respond (people sometimes known as " lurkers"), yet who have questions, concerns, or comments, to "put their oar in; to say 'What about this?' or 'Here's something...'." The participation will help make the conversation richer for everyone.

Although he hopes conversations will be built from the teaching lives of the participants, Wilhelm also has a few ideas to begin the conversations that he, along with coauthor and fellow teacher-researcher Tanya Baker, will facilitate. Without giving away any specific topics, suffice it to say that anyone who joins the March 2003 edition of the Authors and Issues Online Conference will find themselves participating in an engaging dialogue that covers teacher research from its base practicality to its ramifications for students and for teaching methods; the creation of knowledge and its dissemination; as well as the roles that teachers play professionally in an age of standards. After talking with Wilhelm, it's apparent that the next Authors and Issues

*Note: The above-mentioned labels refer to students considered to be emotionally disturbed (ED) or learning disabled (LD), affected by attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or students learning English as a second language (ESL).
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Online Conference will prove to be well worth the wait. Perhaps in the interim, we could all read a few good books—coauthored by Jeff Wilhelm!

To take part in the upcoming Authors and Issues Online Conference featuring Jeff Wilhelm and Tanya Baker, learn more about the series, or read a transcript of this interview—visit www.writingproject.org/Programs/online/authors. Online registration for the conference is planned to begin in mid-February 2003. Registration will be open to all NWP teachers on a first-come, first-served basis.

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