Teacher Research Crucial to Success of Profession


By Richard Sterling

As a teacher of English, my main interest and involvement has been in the field of writing and literacy. My first teaching experience was as a teacher in Mina Shaughnessy's basic writing program at City College of New York in 1970. This was during the first years of open admissions at the university, and our job was to prepare students for college-level writing. These students were very bright, yet very unused to the demands of college writing. Mina Shaughnessy had only a few suggestions for me. She said "watch, listen, ask questions. Students have reasons for doing what they do. Their 'errors' make sense to them. (Her book Errors and Expectations is still well worth reading.) Find out what they do and why they do it, and you have the first steps to suggesting a more effective practice." In many ways that "watch, listen, ask questions," was my first lesson in reflective practice. And these are words I have carried with me into the present as my own role as an educator has changed.

We are at an important moment in our profession. We are beginning to see educational standards rise everywhere, and consequently we see new demands on our profession and on young people for whom education, at least through community college, is no longer an option. In my view, the active involvement of teachers is essential to meeting these demands, and teacher networks, like the National Writing Project, are key to the support for teachers' intellectual lives, including their participation in teacher research.

I would like to talk today about the importance of the process and publication of teacher research to all aspects of our work as educators, including the professional development we offer. First of all, some history. We have been thinking about the ideas of classroom inquiry in our profession for quite some time. James Britton, who for many years was at the Institute for Education in London, described the decisions that teachers make every day:

A teacher must make a hundred and one decisions in every session — off-the-cuff decisions that can only reliably come from inner conviction, that is to say by consistently applying an ever-developing rationale. This requires that every lesson should be for the teacher an inquiry, some further discovery, a quiet form of research, and that time to reflect, draw inferences, and plan further inquiry is essential.

This idea that teaching, at its best, is always a "quiet form of research" captures for me why taking charge of our profession is so intimately linked to the intellectual lives of teachers and the possibilities of classroom-based research. When we allow ourselves to think that we do not have to be fully present in our work, that we don't have to be thoughtful and reflective, when we do not find ways for teachers to collaborate both within and outside of school, we limit the contributions that all of us as teachers can make to new knowledge for the profession. The "quiet form of research" is essential to teaching, but taking charge of our profession requires more than that — it requires teachers working together in research communities, writing for audiences both local and national, and sharing their ongoing work with a broad range of colleagues.

Teaching remains hard work. As I listen to writing project teacher consultants and directors describe their teaching and their research projects, I know that teacher research has not made their teaching lives easier. In fact,

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the results of their projects often point to new work that needs to be undertaken to improve the classroom learning environment. It has, however, also given many teachers new energy for their ongoing work, especially when they link an area of their research to others in the education community investigating similar questions.

Indeed, teachers everywhere are recognizing that, despite the difficulties, inquiry is important to all aspects of our work as educators. Noticing the places where our teaching isn’t working, where our carefully crafted lessons seem to fall flat, where our selection of books is not being embraced by our students — these places are the fertile ground for inquiry that can fuel our teaching and spark a more systematic investigation into our practice. In much the same way, when we conduct inservice work, especially when we work with new teachers, we find that they often have more puzzles, questions, and plain panics about their teaching than we could ever solve in an inservice session. If we develop that inquiry stance early, and demonstrate the power of bringing that information into a group of other teachers, we demonstrate the power of our model for a professional community to find solutions without being solely dependent on others for knowledge.

I am proud of the leadership role that the National Writing Project has taken in disseminating and honoring teacher research. For over twenty years, teacher research has appeared regularly in the NWP Quarterly. In addition, the NWP recognizes the body of work of a teacher researcher each year with the Hechinger Award, and the Ylvisaker Award is given annually to the best Quarterly article written by a classroom teacher.

The NWP also publishes books by and for teacher researchers. The latest NWP title, Teacher researchers at Work (1999) by Marian Mohr and Marion MacLean, offers a comprehensive, detailed guide to teacher research, rich with the voices of teacher researchers from the Northern Virginia Writing Project. Cityscapes (1996) highlights eight views from the classroom by members of the NWP’s Urban Sites Network, and I Can Write What’s on My Mind: Theresa Finds Her Voice, (1994) by Sherry Swain, Director of the Mississippi Writing/Thinking Institute, provides an intimate look at one teacher research project. As so often happens, the publication of Sherry Swain’s teacher research study was just the beginning of new directions for work, fertile ground for new inquiries into practice, as she wrote in reflections on her study:

The partnership with Theresa’s parents has had a ripple effect on my teaching. Reading the notes from her mother gave me a window into Theresa’s learning that I wanted to experience with every student. But how could I initiate a written dialogue with all the parents? It seemed that first step was to bring the parents together and share something of myself with them, to let them know the depth of my concern and respect for their children, to create a non-threatening environment in which they would be willing to share with me—not private family secrets, but information that would help me understand the children as learners. I began with a parent workshop that has since grown into a series of workshops where parents come to the classroom, without their children, for evenings of talking, writing, and sharing with each other and with me. (p. 93)

While educators have long discussed the need for parental involvement in their children’s learning, it is the particular way that parents are invited to be part of a dialogue that made this approach successful in Sherry Swain’s classroom setting. That does not mean that this particular approach won’t be useful to other teachers, but rather that the grounded inquiry that produced it is essential to understanding the particular strategies and structures that were created. It is not part of a “parent-proof” curriculum for parental involvement in school.

The ways in which teacher researchers make their findings public is critical to the ongoing dialogue about educational change and to avoiding simplistic solutions to complex problems. I know how long it takes for busy and committed teachers to also find time to write about their research findings, to share drafts with peers, to revise, rethink, and edit work for local and national publications, but it is critical that we, as a profession, continue to write for publication. And much of the work of teacher researchers will not have the impact it deserves unless we continue to pay attention to its form and substance, subjecting it to the rigorous standards needed for placing such work in the public domain. The universities that host writing projects can help by making a substantial commitment to teachers and their research. We must join our colleagues who are struggling to write and publish, providing the kind of careful guidance that will ensure that questions about teacher research that come from the larger educational community can be answered.

In a recent article, Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle described the teacher research movement over the last decade (Educational Researcher, Vol 28, No. 7. October 1999), noting the movement’s power. They recognized the importance of all types of teacher research in creating “… new kinds of social relationships that assure the isolation of teaching” and “… inquiry communities structured to foster deep intellectual discourse about critical issues”(p. 22).

I am proud that the sites of the National Writing Project provide professional communities for teachers where we can make our teaching public and demonstrate our knowledge over time. Together with others in our profession we can “take charge” of difficult educational questions, investigate complex problems, and share our findings with our colleagues.

NWP DC Day and Spring Meeting 2000!

Join NWP directors and teacher leaders from across the country on April 6-7, 2000, for an exciting two days in Washington, D.C., during cherry blossom month. Spend Thursday morning in the majestic Senate building, hearing from our key supporters in the House and Senate. Make personal visits to your own members of Congress that afternoon. Hear and tell stories of Congressional adventures later that evening at a cocktail reception at Holiday Inn on The Hill. Spend Friday with your peers in group discussions related to running a writing project site and to teaching writing.

Call Roxanne Barber at 510-642-7877 or email barber@uclink4.berkeley.edu for more information. Deadline for registration and room reservations is Friday, March 3, 2000.

Mark your calendars today!