WHAT HAPPENS WHEN TEACHER/CONSULTANTS BECOME CURIOUSER AND CURIOUSER?

Teacher/Consultants are naturally curious, and they have a sense of follow-through when their curiosities grow, one question leading to another. Within the year following the first summer institute, they are asking, “What happens when a chemistry student uses writing to learn chemistry?” “What happens when my students revise?” “What do my students do when they hold a conference with me on their writings?” “What do my students do when they read their work aloud?” “How do my students handle the shift from black dialect in conversation to Network English in writing?”

But where are these teachers going to find time to conduct research? If they’re teaching full-time, they might have some time to collect data, but they also need time to make sense of it, to draw conclusions, check out observations, consult with other researchers, learn new methods for conducting research, and time to share their findings with others. Because these are the best teachers in the profession, committed to their careers and to the students they teach, they don’t want to give up teaching. The time for research, therefore, must come from within the contract hours.

The Northern Virginia Writing Project is attempting to respond to the expressed needs of these Teacher/Consultants who wish to become Teacher/Researchers. We are beginning by asking top researchers to show us how they conduct research. Donald Graves, for instance, has given us his model for forming research questions. He has also confirmed our inclination to pursue our questions initially without an extensive reading of previously conducted research. Teacher/Consultants already know an enormous amount about writing, students, and writing instruction, and their own intuitions and curiosity are, in my estimation, their best point of departure.

One workshop in researching is not sufficient to make the mental transition from “teacher” who directs, guides, assists, and evaluates, to “researcher” who questions and probes. Through the Writing Research Center, established with funds from the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, we are offering a series of workshops on researching, beginning with Nancy I. Sommers in October. We already have a successful model for the workshops in the BAWP presentation format, and we are asking the researchers to provide as much hands-on experience as possible.
To give day-to-day support during this training period, we have formed small research groups much like our Reading/Writing groups. They are meeting regularly to discuss their research questions, to share data, improvise methodologies, and to discover the meaning of their observations. In addition, all the people in the project involved in research gather once a month at our Saturday project meetings to work on whole group interests. At such times we distribute articles which we think will assist the Teacher/Researchers.

The idea of a classroom teacher conducting writing process research is new. If my notes from Donald Graves’ talk on this are correct, of the research conducted between 1955-1972, 68% focused on what teachers did, with the basic assumption that the teacher was the only one who could motivate the students to write. Eighty-four percent of this research was conducted as dissertations, focusing heavily on methodology. Janet Emig’s *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* is unique in focusing on writing process research at a particular grade level. Between 1972 and 1978 there was a great renewal in research on composing with about 43% of the studies conducted in this period focusing on process, although 72% of all the research still studied what the teacher did. A trend in this later period was the move toward non-dissertation research—only 48% of the studies were dissertations as compared to 84% in the previous period.

Research conducted in the last few years has tended to be conducted in the context of the classroom rather than in isolated laboratory schools. Elliot Mischler’s article in the February 1979 issue of *Harvard Educational Review* entitled “Meaning in Context: Is There Any Other Kind?” suggests that research in the physical sciences can be conducted in a controlled environment, but such studies on students don’t make much sense for classroom teachers because they know they’re dealing with real students in a real classroom.

Writing process research, however, is still in its infancy, both in its methodology and in the extent of the research completed to date. Among the many prominent researchers, Donald Graves has worked with primary students, Janet Emig with high-school seniors, Lee Odell, Linda Flower, Sondra Perl and Nancy Sommers with college freshmen. Even though some of these studies focus on the whole process, countless questions are still being raised about individual parts of the process, and research completed on students at one grade or ability level also needs to be extended to students at other levels.

In addition to the workshops on research, the Writing Research Center, with its two-year $176,000 grant, will be awarding funding for Teacher/Researchers at the college level to conduct research on the composing processes of college students. At the same time, the WRC staff is writing proposals to seek support for Teacher/Researchers, K-12, to be released from one class per day or one day per week. As with the grant for Teacher/Researchers on the college level, funds will not be used to remove the Teacher/Researcher from the classroom but to reduce the teaching load.

We are also pursuing alternatives to outside funding. One of our local school districts, for example, is considering designating one of its sabbaticals for in-house research. Still another alternative is job sharing in which two teachers each teach half-time yet both maintain career privileges and benefits. The advantages to the districts are that they keep their best teachers in the classroom where they are the most valuable, yet enable these same teachers to conduct research which informs the profession and lends prestige and visibility to the district.

The Writing Research Center has already developed a community of Teacher/Researchers. It is functioning as the research and development arm of the project, generating new information which is helping both the Teacher/Researchers in their professional growth, and other Teacher/Consultants who are proud to use the research findings to further substantiate their own best practices. And in a very special way, it is helping us to overcome some of the obstacles to improving the teaching of writing for all students at all grade levels.

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