The Perils and Pleasures of Teacher Research:
Excerpts from a Journal I Never Kept

by

Martha Dudley

Labor Day: That golden moment when all seems possible. Classroom ready, welcoming, pristine; gradebook with names entered neatly, and a positive feeling toward each one (never mind that I haven’t actually laid eyes on any of the students represented by those names); energy abundant; plans for the year—well, not exactly complete, but I do have the first week sketched out. This is the year of the orderly progression, each week building on the last, everything balanced. I won’t start sentence combining and then not get back to it until three weeks later. And I won’t do literature responses but never get around to reviewing the elements of a story. I’ll respond perceptively to my students’ writing and get those papers back to them before the next essay. And this is the year for classroom research. I’ll define my question early, write in my research journal daily, and gain some useful insights. Perhaps the question will be, “What activities bring about real revision?”

September 16: I feel that my 15 years of teaching have failed to prepare me for these past two weeks. My plans are mocking me. Research on revision seems an unlikely prospect. Far too many of my students, more than in any other year, cannot read or write on anything approaching the seventh-grade level. Most frustrating are the behaviors that have confounded my efforts to get a year of learning underway. My students seem to be at the mercy of every impulse: They shout things out, ridicule each other, literally fall out of their chairs, and trample one another getting in and out of the classroom. Of course, if this description characterized every single student, my tasks would be simpler; not easier, perhaps, but simpler. But in addition to the students that fit that description, I have the quiet, earnest students who are ready to learn and somewhat prepared to work on the reading and writing tasks of seventh grade, and a few students whose abilities and achievements far surpass my expectations. How can I possibly think of doing classroom research in this situation?

September 30: Somehow, things have gotten a little better. The kids have almost stopped snarling at one another, and I’m learning to live with a noise level I never thought I could stand. I am going to try to have some sort of a research project. I’ve identified six students, three in each block, and I’m going to collect their work and focus on them in my journal writing.

November 9: Six students—what a joke! Looking back from the midnight privacy of my workroom, I squirm with embarrassment. My best laid plans have been altered dramatically by the facts of middle grade life: Of the six, Paul and Jose have refused to turn in any work. Cesar has been identified as being a special education student who has too many influences on his learning other than my classroom. Cynthia has moved away, and Albert’s many wild transgressions of our discipline policy will, I’m afraid, bring his collection of referrals to the magic number necessary for transfer to an alternative program. So I’m left with Matthew and happy to have him.

Although things have calmed somewhat since our bewildering days of September, the calm has brought
Anyway, the decision about which student to study has got to be made early, and lived with; you can’t go back a few weeks or months and pick up the pieces.

I am already learning about the perils of teacher research. If you study one student, there’s no way of knowing, right at the beginning of the year when you want to save some early work, which student should be “the one.” As with my other five, students disappear from the classroom, physically or figuratively; or their strengths or weaknesses, which made their work seem interesting to study, may prove to be illusory. Anyway, the decision about which student to study has got to be made early, and lived with; you can’t go back a few weeks or months and pick up the pieces. It’s hard enough to get work saved, in all its drafts, with prewriting, assignment descriptions, responses and other bits and pieces, while juggling all the other parts of the job.

November 26: Okay, this is it. Time to get serious. I’ve got copies of Matthew’s work so far neatly arranged in a binder, beginning with the first piece he wrote.

On September 8, we did “The Perfect Gift.” Matthew’s prewriting: The best gift for my mom would be a car. It meses up alot I am tierd of the way it looks am tierd of it insid

His rough draft: The best gift for my mother is a car becaus it meses up alot. I am tierd of the color and the way it runs and look out side. and the way it look inside.

Final draft: The best gift for my mom is a car because it mest up alot I am tierd of the color and the way it runs and look on the out side and the way it look inside

Matthew’s comparison of rough and final: The chane I Made was I pit rans and I made some spelling correctin

Well. If I’d wanted a piece of writing to remind me of my despair at the beginning of the year, of my dismay at the lack of preparation and experience exemplified by Matthew’s paper, this is it. Matthew’s work represents that of many students, and I remember what I was looking at the first few hot September evenings.

Let’s see if I can make any sense of this. Matthew knows about prewriting: His original cluster has boxes, circles, and arrows (not shown here). He’s done this before. It’s interesting that his prewriting and rough draft are almost identical in words and length. When he wrote his rough draft, he added because which indicates some instinct for syntax; he is relating one idea to another. This wouldn’t be worth commenting on except I’m discovering that each year more and more students do less and less of this connection, and I’m increasingly confronted with primer prose composed of sentences eight to ten words long. In his rough draft he’s elaborated (if that isn’t stretching the meaning of that word) on meses up alot by adding the way it runs. Several things concern me. One is a lack of awareness of audience, in that he seems to have no interest in convincing anyone that a new car is the best gift for his mother. He simply expresses his own feelings about her present car. The piece has almost no specifics, relying instead on general words and expressions: the color, the way it runs, the way it look inside. Most worrisome is Matthew’s reluctance to write anything at all. Matthew does have a clear idea of the physical appearance of an essay: On his final draft there’s a title and the indentation of a paragraph, and some periods were placed correctly. His idea of revision is consistent with that of most of my students: Correct the spelling. Except for helpfully inserting on the between look and outside, there were no other changes — no other words chosen, no elaboration, and no reordering of ideas.

November 29: Still trying to catch up on scrutinizing some of Matthew’s work. On October 12, we edited childhood memory poems. Matthew’s edited version reads:

My Childhood Memory
I could be any age I would be
four having a stuffed dog
five sitting in a chair watch t.v.
six being scared of the dark at night
seven getting a bike for my birthday
eight falling off my bike
nine being afraid of the dentist
ten afraid to look under my bed
 eleven afraid of school
twelve afraid of starting in Lincoln school.

As I look at Matthew’s poem this evening, I notice that many lines deal with being afraid of something. This is consistent with my biggest concern about Matthew: He’s afraid to write, afraid of the mistakes he knows will characterize his work. My intuition tells me that the only thing to do is to keep him writing — constantly — and to only hold him accountable for correctness when I can provide direct instruction or pair him up with a competent peer editor.

December 11: It’s Sunday night and usually my low point of the week as I realize what I haven’t gotten done over the weekend and that somehow my life has taken a wrong turn. As the rest of the civilized world is relaxing with a good book, I’m faced with lesson plans and paper grading. But this Sunday night is different. I have looked at Matthew’s “My Favorite Toy” essay, and I’m happy. Something’s happening in Matthew’s work.

Matthew’s clustering: stuffed dog in a circle in the middle; evenly arranged around this, all in circles and connected to the middle circles by lines, are the following: what color, what it did, what it look like, where is it now and how it is, How old was I when I got it, what I called it, what kind of dog was it, How I play with it, How big was it, Who gave it to me. Each item is checked off.

Matthew’s rough (and I mean rough) draft:

My favorite toy was a stuffed dog. It was brown with big ears and it was small. It was about a foot tall. I was about 4 or 5 when I got it. I got it from my mom and dad for my birthday, and I called it Dan. I do not know what kind of dog it is but it has big ear, and like a it is small eye and it small. I played with it game and other stuff that I make up game that I do not know what they are like I would throw him in the air so he can fly and I would catch and now I have it in a bag with other stuff animals and it look bran now but it is a little faded and the ear are the way the where when I got the dog, and the with need to be wash a little and ther is nothing rong with it is still sioned to gether no hols, or teare in it, and his eye are ok the only thing rong with him is he is a fade that all rone for him and I still have it rigi now.

Okay. So this is a mess. But two full pages! He’s named a color and a size (I’m thinking about that first “Perfect Gift” essay when I didn’t even know the color of car that Matthew was tired of), and he’s mentioned, although in a general way, size of ears and eyes. He’s doggedly (no pun intended) worked his way through every point in his prewriting in an organized manner, losing focus only when he mentioned twice that the only thing wrong with the toy is that it is faded. He’s used a few somewhat specific words: faded, sewed, and tears, and mentioned a specific activity that he remembered: throwing Dan in the air so he could fly.

As I look at Matthew’s poem this evening, I notice that many lines deal with being afraid of something. This is consistent with my biggest concern about Matthew: He’s afraid to write, afraid of the mistakes he knows will characterize his work.

Through the first three fourths of a page, there are few errors, though the sentences are very short. As Matthew seemed to become more interested in his topic, he became less able to control syntax, punctuation, and spelling. The more involved he became, the less he attended to correctness. I can’t help but feel this is a strange sort of progress. In this piece, Matthew was willing to immerse himself in his topic at the expense of mechanics. He seems ready to take some risks — a requisite attitude for good writers.

I’m looking at the responses Matthew got from his partners. They’re awful. If I didn’t know students could do better than this, I’d give up on response groups.

Dear Matthew
I liked the part where you made up games and when you threw it up in the air so it could fly. I would ask you if it had legs or arms and if you took it places like to fresno. your friend Jesse

Matthew your story was about a stuffed dog you should write your name end of the story ... (indecipherable) ... why did you get a stuffed dog why did you have numbers in the side (a reference to the word count Matthew wrote on his paper) by Sal
Dear Matthew, I really liked your story, so how has
dan been doing well so I see you had a lot of fun with
dan! What was the game you played with him.
Sincerely, Jaime

Dear Matthew My favor part of your story is when
you played with and when you got him for you
birthday and that you still have it with you. what
happened to you dog? How long is it sincerely Matthew
(This is the response Matthew wrote to himself.)

As the best response he received, Matthew chose
Jaime’s: because he ask good question.

Matthew’s group is struggling with writing as much
as he is. Response groups need to be heterogeneous,
but they also need to be self-selected. While inexperi-
enced writers don’t need to hear from other inexperi-
enced writers, the most accomplished writers defi-
nitely need to hear from other accomplished writers.
Now there’s a research question: “What’s the best way
to set up response groups?” or, “What kinds of re-
sponses are students capable of writing to one an-
other?” Guess I’ll leave those to another teacher re-
searcher. But I doubt that Matthew’s revision efforts
were guided by these responses. Another thought: I
know Matthew’s teammates are very poor readers —
they probably don’t read each other’s papers any
more perceptively than they read a printed text — so
how can I possibly expect them to respond helpfully?
Maybe oral reading is the answer for these groups.
Certainly more careful monitoring on my part seems
called for.

Looking at Matthew’s marked up rough draft, I see
that his opening, My favorite toy was a stuffed dog
became I remember when I was a small kid and I had a stuff
dog. I’m willing to see that as an effort to orient
and engage a reader. He’s also added a sentence that
makes his paper seem more finished: To his previous
last sentence, … and I still have it right now, he’s now
added That is why he was my favorite to me. He’s made
some changes in pronoun use: It to he and them to him.
Some bits that just stopped me cold because they
were almost incoherent have been changed: and like a
it is small eye and it small … became … and he has small
eye, while … and the with need to be wash is now …and
it needs to be wash. I’m willing to see this effort to
smooth the bumpiest parts of the piece as reader
awareness, the absolutely crucial element to growth in
writing achievement. Too many students painstakingly
copy over these garbled passages with out ever realizing
how unintelligible they are; Matthew’s ability to re-
see his piece, at least bits of it, is a little spring in the
desert for me.

Looking at his final draft, I also see that he’s spelled
many more words correctly, though there are still
many errors:

My favorite toy when I was small
I remember when I was a small kid and I had a stuff dog
it was brown with big ears and it was small. It was
about a foot tall. I was about 4 or 5 when I got him.
I got him from my Mom and Dad for my birthday.
And I called him Dan. I did not know what kind of a
dog he is but he has big ears, and he has small eye. I
played with it game and other stuff that I would make
up game that I did not know what they were like I
would throw him up in the air so he can fly. And now
I still have him in a bag with other stuff animal and
it looks brand new but it is faded a little. And the ear
are the way they were when I got dan. And it needs
to be wash a little. An there is nothing wrong with
him. He still has no hole, tears in him. And his eye are
ok. The only thing wrong with him is he is faded. And
I still have him right now. That is why he was my
favorite toy to me.

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As I look at the comments Matthew made on the
differences between his rough and final versions, I see
he’s noted every single change he made and added I
do not know how to do R in handwritten. For some reason
that touches me; Matthew is owning up to every
shortcoming he has.

December 15: Seeing Matthew’s progress has rein-
forced my determination to do some sort of research
project this year, even if it’s only looking closely at
Matthew’s work. But don’t I have to have some sort of hypothesis as to why Matthew’s making some progress? If there’s one thing we’ve done a lot of so far, it’s Rebekah Caplan’s “showing writing.” The way I use these short pieces (per Caplan) is simply to give credit for them and then choose one or two to read aloud. Maybe, just by accident, I provided what Matthew needed: acceptance of his efforts to write.

January 9: Each team worked to make a “poster” of the main ideas and details of the Aztec lesson from the social studies text. Matthew was completely involved, leaning over his teammate who was recording the group’s ideas. At the end of the session, I asked his team what each had done. Matthew said he had read the textbook and found details (other team tasks were to identify main idea, check spelling, and actually do the writing). Earlier in the year Matthew hardly participated. He’d often sit in the classroom rather than go out for a break.

January 10: I decided to sit in on the discussion in Matthew’s novel group. Big mistake! Me: “What’s happened so far [in Old Yeller]?” Lupe recounted the story, in interminable detail. As he talked, Jose looked up names in the novel and supplied them to him and referred to the novel to confirm the setting. Matthew sat, saying nothing. When I asked him what he could add, the others talked before he could answer. I reminded them that they all needed to talk. Then I asked Matthew in what ways Old Yeller was like Where the Red Fern Grows. Matthew could not or would not say anything about the book, not even that both books were about boys, despite much prompting from me along those lines.

January 20: I asked the novel groups to discuss one character in their novel. Never one to give up when something isn’t working, I joined Matthew’s group, even though my presence last week was obviously inhibiting. As I pulled my little stool up to their table, silence fell. I asked them what character they were discussing, and then reminded them that I shouldn’t be asking this. They very politely refrained from agreeing with me. Lupe repeated the question, and Jose said, “The dog” — not even “Old Yeller.” Lupe, the summarizer, resumed that role, turning toward me. I made him turn toward the rest of the group, asking myself why I’m butting in but continuing to do so. In my best I’m-in-control-here manner, I said that they must talk about a person. They decided on Travis and proceeded to hold a very halting discussion. Matthew’s only contribution to the entire discussion, when I asked how Billy from Red Fern and Travis are alike, was to state that they both don’t go to school.

As I look back on this entry and the one from last week, I’m comparing Matthew’s active participation, as I watched him from a distance, with his reticence when I tried to interact with his team. The progress I see Matthew making might be partly due to a group structure that allows him to try out ideas, make mistakes, and get some non-threatening guidance from his peers. I usually leave the groups pretty much alone as they work on a task or hold a discussion, waiting until the time when each group shares with the rest of the class to learn what they accomplished. However, lately I’ve been thinking that a “real” teacher researcher would be more actively involved with Matthew. I think I’ll go back to my more passive role and quit bugging him.

March 19: We’re gearing up for the writing proficiency exam. This year it’s to be a report of information essay. I thought the kids would groan about my assigning topics instead of the writers’ workshop, but they seem to like the idea that we’re all moving together toward this huge challenge. Maybe they’re just tired of trying to think up their own writing ideas.

I can see myself studying one student a year until I am so old and eccentric that the district makes me a roving sub to get me to resign.

March 30: Every once in a while I do get a good idea. The kids and I were both running out of steam preparing for the proficiency exam, so I decided to fall back on the workshop approach and told the kids to simply write about something they are good at. Everybody got real busy. Matthew was writing about lowrider bikes.

April 3: I looked through the stack of final drafts from the morning block and found Matthew’s.

Dear Anhoney,
Do you know anything about lowrider bicycles? If
you don’t let me tell you about them. The are a lot of parts. The part are a gooseneck. (Matthew lists many parts to a bike.)

The second thing that I would like to tell you is that this hobby cost a lot of money, hear are some prises…. (There’s a long list of items with prices.)

The third thing I would like to tell you is that I put one of these bicycles to gether for the fun of it. Some people do it for the fun of it. Some people put the bicycle to gether just to keep out of trouble. Some people just experement and see what they can do with it and turn it into something nice.

I got the price from the lowrider bicycle magazin. Hear are some of bicycles that are in the magazin. (Matthew names bicycles like Heaven on Earth, Touch of Gold, and Joker and describes each one.) Ther are a lot of more bicycles in the magazin.

This is the only thing that I would like to tell you about these kind of bike. This is a good hobby and fun and you may want to try it to.

I could not have asked that Matthew make any more progress so far this year than he has shown me with this paper. If I were a more experienced teacher researcher, I might have devised a way to tell whether it was the workshop approach, the process approach, or Matthew’s own inner literacy clock that suddenly ticked over to a new day. I do know a few things. As I look back at all the work I collected for Matthew, I see that the “perfect gift” paper is representative of what Matthew wrote for the first few weeks and that “favorite toy” represents his work from the second quarter. Now I have this paper, several hundred words long and full of concrete language and words like experiment that he’s not afraid to misspell. And he consistently focuses on his topic and his audience, beginning with, Do you know anything about lowrider bicycles? If you don’t let me tell you about them, and ending with, This is a good hobby and fun and you may want to try it to. Even his use of clumsy transitions, the first thing … the second thing, heartens me because of the awareness of the need of a reader to be led through the piece.

April 5: Now that my initial jubilation over Matthew’s paper has worn off, I’m left with some questions. I didn’t observe Matthew carefully as he worked on this paper; in looking back at his rough draft, I find that it’s almost indecipherable because of all the editing and revision marks. He crossed out an incoherent section at the bottom of the first page and added several phrases on Post-It notes. His beginning is the same on both rough and final versions, but he added the last sentence when he revised. His editing partner was Rudy, one of the best spellers in the class. But the length of the paper seems to have overwhelmed both Matthew and Rudy, since many spelling errors remain in the final. So again, I’ve got more questions than answers: How, exactly, does a student revise? What made Matthew want to change his paper? How did he decide what to take out, and what to leave in? Did Rudy give him the idea for the conclusion? Everything on Matthew’s paper is in his own handwriting.) A good researcher would supplement looking at papers with close classroom observation and conversation with the student. That’s what I can’t seem to manage — yet.

In fact, during the 1994-95 school year, as in many previous years, I did keep a classroom journal in a sporadic but strangely satisfying way. It just didn’t have many entries about Matthew. Although it didn’t focus on either my original research plan or, very often, on Matthew, keeping a classroom journal made me think of myself as a writer again. But it also brought the tension and guilt of not writing. If only each day I could write down one incident, impression, observation — something concrete, stated in the most precise words I can summon — what a picture I’d have of my students. I couldn’t help but become a better writer — not good, but better. Also, when I do a study of an individual student, I want to record the entire classroom context in order to see that student’s work in perspective. I write every day for a few weeks, and I find myself calmer in the face of classroom disappointment and confusion and happier in the midst of success as I think of sorting it all out that evening at my computer. Then more days, stretching into weeks, will fly by when I don’t write a word about my classroom.

This year I didn’t even consider any research project other than trying to tell the story of one student or, rather, the little part of that story that I’ve been able to piece together. I chose a second language learner. The plan was simply to write about what happened in
class to provide a context for the student’s work as I collected it, then to revisit that work, look at it whole and in pieces, and write about it. I fall far short of my goal of writing daily, but I am consistent about collecting my student’s work. And when I do immerse myself in a student’s work, write about it, and learn, the rewards are always there.

What’s the future for me as a teacher researcher? I can see myself studying one student a year until I am so old and eccentric that the district makes me a roving sub to get me to resign. I’ve learned organizational tricks that make saving, copying, storing, and studying a student’s writing one more thing that I can fit into my day, one more plate that I can keep in the air. I don’t feel I’ll ever get tired of doing this or cease to learn from it. It’s something that can’t be false; basing everything on a student’s actual work keeps me grounded in reality. Moving from the particular to the general, taking what I learn about one student’s work and using that to improve my teaching of all my students seems sensible. My life as a teacher can never have enough moments when I know, really know, that a student is learning. If I hadn’t sat in despair on a fall evening and transcribed Matthew’s 37-word “perfect gift” piece, in which he doesn’t even care to tell me what color something is, I’d never have known what he’d accomplished with his several pages about lowrider bikes and his questions and invitations to a reader. How can I not do classroom research?

Reference

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