Boston Writing Project’s New-Teacher Inquiry Course Syllabus

By Stephen Gordon and David Russell

What is the resource?
This syllabus outlines the areas of study of a 36-hour, 3-credit course in inquiry at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, that was developed for new teachers by the Boston Writing Project’s New-Teacher Initiative and that uses various processes, especially writing, to explore and communicate ideas.

What was our rationale for using the resource?
Through the course, we want new teachers to understand and experience the power of teacher inquiry to sustain and energize teaching. We feel teacher inquiry may be an especially important way for newer teachers to become lifelong learners in their classrooms, able to decide, express, and pursue what is best for their teaching and their students’ learning.

In addition, since groups of teachers engage in teacher inquiry together, the experience provides support, motivation, and validation for teacher decision making—a shared way to reflect on one’s craft to get better at it. (This is not a course on doing quantitative, “academic” educational research.) As reflective practitioners, examining their classrooms and instructional decisions, the participants will, we hope, build sufficient confidence to work through their teaching uncertainties and succeed with their students.

How did we use the resource?
The new-teacher inquiry course is facilitated by two teacher-consultants and is designed for up to twelve new teachers. Class activities are constructed to help create and maintain an intellectual and professional community built on disclosure, problem solving, reading, writing, and a belief that teachers must find for themselves the words and actions most likely to produce success in their work.
Each class—which feels more like a collaborative work-session than a traditional college class—begins with a writing activity (see “Teacher Inquiry Opening Free-Write,” which follows the syllabus.) After a read-around and discussion, participants turn toward an examination, in small groups, of their assigned readings as they relate to their own inquiry.

The class then divides into two groups, each facilitated by one of the teacher-consultants, to update each other on their inquiry projects and to receive suggestions and insights for further investigation. Between sessions, participants continue to write about their inquiries and then submit their writings to the teacher-consultants, who provide detailed feedback. The topics, readings, and experiences are all designed to be recursive and generative.

**What was the impact on the new teachers?**

As our new teachers have investigated and thought individually and together, we believe that they developed an attachment to the profession and simultaneously to a challenging, supportive way of working in it. The community that results as they uncover and express their authentic teaching lives and identities—their motivating visions, their hopes and beliefs, and the confusing realities of their classrooms—leads to individual growth and professional solidarity. These factors, we believe, contribute to a strong commitment to teaching as a profession.

**What does the resource represent about our site’s work?**

The Boston Writing Project has a long history of providing coursework through the University of Massachusetts, Boston. The addition of this inquiry course for new teachers has extended the site’s commitment to teacher inquiry into its course offerings. Because of their positive experience within the course, a good proportion of the participants have applied for the summer institute.

And the converse is true, as well: the course, which was originally developed for new teachers only, has been incorporated into the site’s course offerings for both new and
veteran teachers. As a matter of fact, this course has become a next step for teacher-consultants after their summer institute experience.

For more information, contact David Russell or Stephen Gordon.

The following is the syllabus used for the course:

**The Reflective Teacher: Classroom Inquiry and Research**

Three Credit Special Topics Course, UMass Boston, 2005-2006

Stephen Gordon and David Russell

**Course Description:**
This course is designed for teachers interested in conducting teacher research in their classrooms. Its goal is to create a community of practice for teachers-as-researchers who can reflect on, investigate, understand and share their craft, students and classrooms with colleagues. At the outset of this year-long course participants will decide on questions about their teaching practices that they will research throughout the academic year. They will personally situate their questions in their classrooms, their practitioner experience and the field of teacher research; they will also discover what fellow researchers have learned about their questions. They will collect multiple forms of data in their classrooms, analyze and interpret this information, and present their findings and uncertainties to their research community. Each student will prepare a paper narrating, explaining and summarizing their classroom research, thereby generating teacher knowledge.

**Objectives:**
Through this course participants will become better able to:

- Craft inquiry questions pertinent to important issues in their work
- Reflect on, interrogate and discuss their practices, students and classrooms
- Design procedures for collecting different forms of data
• Interpret collected data for utility and validity
• Investigate and evaluate existent teacher and university research
• Produce and present a polished teacher-research paper
• Engage in the discourse of their teacher-as-researcher community
• Collaborate with their peers in inquiring into their practice
• Understand the role that teacher research can have in professional development and in improving schools
• Exemplify the inquiry stance of lifelong reflective teachers

**Texts:**

**Attendance and Class Participation:**
Attendance and class participation are very important. Each session will involve analysis of our readings as well as collaboration with each other on individuals’ projects. An important element for success of teacher research is the development of a reflective community, and inconsistent attendance will interfere with the development of that community. Regular, timely attendance and thoughtful, supportive participation are expected.

**Written Requirements:**
Classes will typically start with a brief writing in response to a prompt as a warm-up for our work.

Reading response papers will be due for approximately the first half of our sessions. These papers will help the discussions of the readings that we will begin with. They should be approximately 2 pages double spaced, and they will be returned with commentary. Among the questions that may be addressed in the reading response papers are:

- What is the author’s purpose for writing this? What is he/she trying to get you to know, understand and/or believe about teacher-research and teacher-researchers? What has the author included to achieve his/her purpose?
- What have you learned about teachers doing research from the reading? Why might it be important to learn?
- What questions does the reading raise for you about your own research and/or teacher research in general?
- What in the reading do you agree and/or disagree with?

The course will build toward and culminate in a major research study. Much of the written work in the course will be steps along the way toward the production of this study. A more detailed timetable for and detailed instructions about the study, including exemplars, will be made available as the course progresses.

**Evaluation:**
Participants will receive letter grades for their work. The expectation is that all participants will fulfill the above requirements and produce high-quality work.

**Class Schedule:**
There will be 12 three-hour sessions on Saturdays, 9–12 at UMass.
September 24

Questions:  What is teacher research?
            What are our questions?
            Where may our research lead?

October 15

Question:  What will be our research focus this year?

Readings:  Dana and Yendol-Silva, Chapter 2: “The Start of Your Journey: Finding a
           Wondering,” pp. 13-48
           Hubbard and Power, Chapter 1: “Why Teacher Research?” pp. 1-21
           Hubbard and Power, Chapter 2: “Questions Evolving,” pp. 22-46

Assignment:  Reading response paper

October 29

Question:  How can we collect our data?

Readings:  Dana and Yendol-Silva, Chapter 4: “Developing a Research Plan: Making
           Inquiry a Part of Your Teaching Practice,” pp. 63-87
           Hubbard and Power, Chapter 3: “Research Plans,” pp. 47-81

Assignments:  Reading response paper

           Collect and bring one example of data on your topic/question from your
           classroom

November 12

Question:  What data should we collect?

Readings:  Hubbard and Power, Chapter 4: “Harvesting Data,” pp. 82-116
           A chapter selected from Cityscapes

Assignments:  Reading response paper

           Collect classroom data using two methods and reflect: What does the data
tell you -- and not tell you?
December 10
Question: How is our data collection proceeding?
What are other ways that we might do it?
What do the kids say?
Readings: A chapter selected from Cityscapes
Assignments: Reading response paper
Collect one example of data that generates student voices, e.g., interviews, letters: What does this data tell you, and not tell you?

January 14
Question: How does your research relate to previous work done about your topic/question?
Reading: Research article pertaining to each teacher’s inquiry/research
Assignment: Read one relevant article about your topic/question. What is satisfying and unsatisfying about this research article? Explain how your research might be informed by this article.

February 4
Question: What can we learn from our data?
Readings: Dana and Yendol-Silva, Chapter 5: “Finding Your Findings: Data Analysis,” pp. 89-106
Assignment: Reading response paper
What claim(s) might you make so far based on your data?

March 4
Question: How have others written up their findings?
Readings: Chapter from Cityscapes
“The Reflective Teacher” articles

Assignment: Reading response paper

March 25

Question: How do I write my inquiry paper?
Hubbard and Power, Chapter 7: “Honest Labor: Writing up Research,” pp. 179-204

Assignment: Draft of first part of your paper and presentation

April 8

Question: What have we found out from our research?
What is its significance?
What still needs to be done?

Reading: Chapter from Cityscapes and other teacher research article

Assignment: Drafts of papers due

May 6

Question: What can we do with our research?

Reading: Dana and Yendol-Silva, Chapter 7: “The End of Your Journey: Making Your Inquiry Public,” pp. 139-148

Assignment: Revising and editing our work

May 20

Presentations of our final papers and celebration!

Teacher Inquiry Opening Free-Write
Please select one (or more) of the following prompts below. Respond to it (them) in a journal free-write focusing in on what was going on with you in the time between meetings. Use your readings, classrooms, conversations, etc. We will take 5–10 minutes.

* I noticed...
* I wonder...
* I began to think...
* I had the feeling...
* I love(d) the way...
* I was surprised...
* This ......................... reminds me ..... 
* I can tell that...
* I want to know...
* I want to know more about...
* I never thought that...
* I don't really understand...
* Something that confused me was...
* What if...