



How Classroom Research can Improve Literacy Instruction

SUMMARY

In this article, two assistant professors in Lehman College's Department of Middle and High School Education argue in favor of classroom research in the context of K-12 schools, as well as teacher education programs. Supported by a substantial body of research, the authors base these arguments on their own experiences as classroom teachers and teacher educators.

As professional educators whose careers have followed a trajectory from classroom teacher to teacher educator, the most valuable thing we can share with our students is *praxis*, or “practice grounded in theory and theory grounded in practice.” (Wink, 2000, p. 60) It is in this zone of praxis that we help new teachers grapple with the understanding of not just what we do or even how we do it, but also why. When the what and how are connected to the why, teachers can be powerful and effective decision-makers in their classrooms because the choices they make are grounded in theory rather than handed down to be passively reproduced. This nexus of theory and practice is at its most

powerful when teachers can begin to develop their own praxis by looking at their work with students through a theoretical lens. This way of working goes by several names. It has been called reflective practice, classroom research, teacher research, classroom inquiry and action research. Simply defined, it is “systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers” (Cochran-Smith, Lytle, 1993, p.7).

Both authors of this article have come to value action research for the impact it has had on our own classrooms, as well as the transformative effect we have seen it have on our students' classrooms. Matthew, a graduate student in the English Education program, has been studying the impact of a peer independent reading

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program on English language learners in his eighth-grade classroom for the past two years. These students, who were struggling and reluctant readers before he began implementing the reading program he designed, are flourishing. He is currently working with Amanda on preparing this research to submit for publication. He undertook this work when he noticed something exciting that was happening in his classroom and wanted to study and document the phenomenon so he could better understand it and share it with others in the field.

This result is consistent with the long and rich history of action research. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993), “The unique feature of the questions that prompt teacher research is that they emanate from neither theory nor practice alone but from critical reflection on the intersection of the two (p. 15).” According to Ferrance (2000), “Research done with the teacher’s students, in a setting with which the teacher is familiar, helps to confer relevance and validity to a disciplined study” (p. 13).

Action research encourages teachers to develop a sense of agency regarding

their work. In simplest terms, the teacher-researcher uses student work samples and the results of a variety of assessments from rubrics to test scores to determine the impact of his or her practice on student learning. In most cases, no extraordinary interventions or experiments are taking place. As the normal work of the classroom goes on, the teacher gathers data and uses a variety of means to reflect on that data in an attempt to understand its significance. The purpose of the research is to determine the effectiveness of a particular set of teaching strategies.

Classroom research begins with the teacher posing a question that frames a particular set of teaching practices within a theoretical construct. The teacher-researcher may, for example, embark on a study of what happens during independent reading in her eighth-grade classroom. Invariably, though, such studies tend to begin with the teacher reflecting on his or her own practice, questioning every aspect of the work — from how students choose books to whether independent reading is really the best practice to be engaged in.

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Amanda Gulla: The Middle-Level English Language Arts Classroom

Early in my teaching career when I was getting my master's degree it was my own classroom research, studying the way my seventh- and eighth-grade students worked independently during writing workshop that set me on the path toward doctoral study. My thesis project was focused on how writing conferences helped students with revision. My data consisted of transcripts of tapes of conferences with students, which I coded and annotated using a form of discourse analysis that looked for patterns in dialogues. Although the students were working independently in their writing workshop and I sat with students one at a time for these conferences in a relatively quiet corner of the room, there was a fairly steady stream of interruptions from other students who needed supplies or guidance. While I took these interruptions in stride as they occurred, troubleshooting as necessary, something different happened later as I was listening to and transcribing the tapes. I began to notice that there were definite patterns in the types of interruptions, and that many of them could be prevented with some careful management on my part. By turning a researcher's lens on my classroom I was able to step back and notice what was going on and what needed to be changed. The students had been

telling me all along what kind of support they needed, but the picture was not clear to me until I had begun to deeply attend with a researcher's ears and eyes, listening to and transcribing tapes that gave an objective picture of what was going on in my classroom during writing workshop.

This experience transformed my teaching. While I had always wanted to be a teacher who gave my students agency to function independently, I needed the clarity of a research problem to help me understand how to make it work. Immediately, I redesigned my classroom to make writing materials easily accessible to students. I began to organize my class into writing groups that I would confer with on a regular basis so the students could get more direct support from me and from each other. Something else began to happen, too. I had already begun designing mini-lessons based on issues I had identified in the students' writing, but my classes were so diverse in their abilities, many lessons were targeted toward half the class at best, while they were either too easy or too difficult for the rest of the students. By working with smaller groups, I was able to tailor the lessons more closely to the specific students' needs, and make them briefer and tighter. Classroom management was no longer the issue it had been when I was trying to teach one strategy to the whole class.

Students began to notice these changes, of course. When they asked why we were suddenly doing things differently, I explained that I had been doing research to learn how to make our classroom work better. Letting students in on this “secret” led them to become more invested in their own learning. Even when some still struggled with their writing, my new teacher-researcher’s lens helped me to look at their work in ways that allowed me to learn things about teaching writing that I have been able to generalize, which is a key purpose of action research. As MacLean and Mohr (1999) say, “No matter what the performance or the quality of the work done, student errors become something of interest, not something that needs to be punished or hidden. They are the points of change, informative shifts, and important clues to the learning process. (p. 108)

In later years, before becoming a professor, I worked as a consultant for the New York City Writing Project, providing literacy staff development to Bronx middle schools. One eighth-grade social studies teacher, Mary, was concerned that the curriculum she had to teach packed so much content into a school year, there was no opportunity for students to develop an understanding of history or cultures in the brief time allotted each

topic. As students were required to take a comprehensive standardized test, she had to cover all of American history from the Revolution to the Cold War between September and April. “I feel like I’m guilty of drive-by teaching,” she complained. Mary worried that if she moved as rapidly as the curriculum demanded, students would not be able to achieve any kind of understanding that would allow them to pass the test, let alone come away with any understanding or recollection of what she had taught them.

Teaching with Visual Images

At this point in the year she was about to embark on a study of the Civil War and Reconstruction. I suggested that one way she might give students some sense of what each historical era was about would be to supply them with iconic visual images. As Susan Sontag (1977) points out, “The photograph is a thin slice of space as well as time” (p. 20). Since Matthew Brady so powerfully captured the brutality of the Civil War in photographs, this seemed like the perfect historical era with which to begin teaching with visual images.

Mary was curious about the impact working with iconic visual images might have on her students’ understanding and memory of what they were learning. She wanted to gather

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data that would help her understand what impact our work with photographs might have on her students' ability to recall and describe events in their historical context.

Students were asked to write in response to the photographs. We chose six images for her class of 24 students who were seated four to a table. Each student at each table got his or her own copy of the picture. Each table was looking at a different image. We began by asking students to spend a few minutes looking closely at the picture we had given them, then label the parts of the picture with words. When they finished, they were to pass their picture along to the next person and see if there was anything they had missed or seen differently from someone else. On the next pass, we asked them to write a one-sentence caption for the photo. Finally, we asked them to imagine they could place themselves inside the picture, and write in any form they chose from that point of view. Some students wrote poems, others wrote monologues, one wrote a letter home from a wounded soldier, another wrote in the form of a prayer.

Students at each table stood and shared their photograph with the rest of the class, then some of the students shared their writing. When we had completed this activity we asked the students what questions the photo-

graphs had raised for them. This gave us a sense of what issues we could explore in the compressed time allotted for the Civil War. The students wanted to know who the people were in the photographs, when this was taking place, what the war was about and who had won. These were the same essential questions most teachers would be addressing in a social studies class. The crucial difference was that these questions had come from the students. Because the answers to these questions came in response to the students' authentic desire to know, students were engaged in the subsequent readings and discussions.

After the success of the Civil War unit, Mary wondered if she could replicate this way of working as she and her classes moved forward in history. I helped her to locate visual images. Sometimes they were photographs, sometimes political cartoons or works of art. For each unit, we developed a similar pattern of looking at images, writing, and raising questions. The information-gathering that followed came from a variety of sources including textbooks, journalistic accounts, documentary films, and works of historical fiction.

As we moved forward in this work together, Mary gradually took over the lead role. By January she and I were still discussing her lessons, but she

did most of the planning and almost all of the teaching. Her research questions became refined as she realized the essential role that writing was playing in the students' engagement and understanding. Throughout each unit, we gave the students a variety of informal writing assignments designed to support their inquiry by giving them space to work through misconceptions and confusion, as well as to make connections and voice opinions about historical events. These assignments, which Elbow (1973), Britton (1975), and Fulwiler (1999) call "writing-to-learn," situate writing as "a generative process that creates thought itself." (Britton, p. 23)

Margo DelliCarpini: The Middle and Secondary School ESL Classroom

My own experience with classroom research is similar to what Amanda has described. My classroom practice was with middle and secondary-level English language learners who were considered Students with Interrupted Formal Education. They enter public schools at the grade level their age would indicate, but due to their lack of experience with formal education in their native country are frequently more than three years behind their peers in terms of literacy development, in either their native language or English. When I began my teaching career, these students comprised a small minority of ELLs.

This population is growing: Research has found that as many as 20% of all high school level and 12% of all middle-level English language learners have missed two or more years of formal education since the age of six (Ruiz de Velasco & Fix, 2000). In addition, more than one-third of new ELLs from Latino backgrounds are placed below grade level in school (Jamieson, Curry & Martinez, 2001). Developing advanced literacy skills for such learners is critical. When I was a new teacher, I found little to no research that targeted middle and high school level ELLs who were developing beginning literacy skills in a second language. The reading research at the time focused primarily on monolingual readers and students with reading disabilities. The literature from the field of TESOL focused on adult learners' (usually college level) use of strategies, and most of that research was conducted on students who had high levels of literacy in their native language. I was on my own; I had to develop a set of questions that needed to be answered, and set about answering them in my classroom. These questions first were basic. I had texts in my classroom that included grammar drill books, leveled and abridged readers, and ESL series that focused on life skills and grammar instruction (going to a restaurant, places in the town, etc.). This material

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was fine for a supplement, but could not form the basis of a program whose goals were to promote language, content, and literacy development. What materials were appropriate? Based on my own action research I found that in order to be effective I had to provide high-quality literature that was modified to fit these students' needs. For example, I relied heavily on read alouds, which gave students access to literature that was beyond their reading level. This then turned into use of books on tape and CD, and finally to readers' theater activities where students either read pre-written scripts or developed their own scripts based on themes relevant to their own lives. Frequently these student-generated scripts dealt with immigration issues, equity, positioning, and feelings of either isolation or acceptance in their new homes. These literacy activities, born out of research in my classroom on who these students were and what their needs were, helped develop literacy and language in ways that would not have been possible using a set of mass-produced, leveled readers, which are frequently the only available materials at a reading level these students can work with.

Other questions, "How do I focus on letter recognition and letter naming with middle-level students who would be insulted by the use of children's material?" and "Is phonological awareness an important construct for

older ELLs?" were an outgrowth of the first. While these students enjoyed collaborative reading activities, the goal was to develop their skills and make them independent, successful readers. A strong finding in the research is the importance of phonological awareness to beginning reading in alphabetic languages such as English. But, the question of how to or if one should focus on these foundational skills at the secondary level remains unanswered. Through action research I found that students who receive explicit instruction in phonological awareness skills become proficient decoders, which allows them to move on to building comprehension strategies. My students were exposed to 20-to-30-minute blocks of phonological awareness instruction using the whole texts we were focusing on in the classroom. In this way they built the necessary foundational skills in a highly contextualized way. The question that grew out of this action research project was, "Is first-language reading development similar to developing these skills in your second language when you haven't developed them in your native language?" The answer to this question, for my students, was "yes and no." Yes because the same critical foundational skills, exposure to quality material, and opportunities for shared and independent reading were critical to my students' success. No, because secondary-level students have very different needs from children

learning to read, and sensitivity, sheltered classroom learning, and understanding of their interests and level of cognitive development were critical to their success. Again, using prepared material with little attention to these individual questions would have created a “one-sized-all” approach to these students and I fear that their success would not have been as complete.

As these questions were answered, I asked more sophisticated questions, based on my increased knowledge that this action research developed for me in my professional practice. Does phonological awareness in a student’s native language transfer to the second language? How can phonological awareness building activities be integrated in a way that does not reduce reading and literacy to a set of unrelated basic skills that will not be accessible to the learners in context? The answers to these questions helped me to develop a program that focused on a variety of authentic texts while building foundational skills that these students lacked. Seeing the transformation from students who struggled with any reading activity and through this struggle lacked the self-efficacy that is a characteristic of successful readers, to young adults who sought out material, found meaning in a variety of texts, and were able to respond to poetry and literature, transformed my own teaching and my students’ public school experiences.

One particular incident that really highlights the effects of classroom-based research was a project that integrated a non-fiction text, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey* (Schlissel, 1982, 1992), with foundational skills pulled directly from the text (focus on individual letter sounds, rhyming, segmenting words, and substituting sounds in word play). Students had opportunities to hear me read aloud, read on their own, and be supported with diary entries that I put on tape for them. They engaged in diary writing activities, explored connections between their own immigration experiences and the women’s emigrant experiences, and finally wrote letters to these women. Both of these writing projects formed a class anthology. Some of my colleagues initially felt that I was working at a level that was too far above that of most of my students. My action research, however, supports my decisions, as it gave me the answers to my questions relating to appropriate material, adapting texts, supporting reading, how best to build foundational skills in context, and how to partner with my students so that their learning experiences are grounded in relevance and are connected to their own experiences. These students were enjoying reading and becoming active, engaged learners.

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If I had not been able to conduct research in my own program, my career would have taken a very different path and my students would not have benefited from my classroom inquiry.

These stories illustrate the value of action research, which enables teachers to develop understandings about their classroom practices that they can apply to their own teaching as well as sharing with the wider world, including teacher candidates in induction programs who can benefit from studying published accounts of classroom research.

Building on the tradition of action research not only guides classroom practice, it ensures future generations of teachers and teacher educators whose work is guided by the profound practice of studying the work we are doing with children while it is happening. For Anthony Clarke:

The emergence of a vibrant and extensive teacher inquiry literature not only attests to its importance for understanding the complex world of schooling but supports our contention that it is one of the defining features that distinguish teaching as a form of professional practice and not as labour or technical work. (2003)

Working both in professional development and in higher education settings, the goal of teacher educators is to foster reflective practice (Schon, 1983; Henderson, 1996). This is why classroom research is so often encouraged in teacher education programs. Through the empirical study of teaching and learning, teachers can examine pedagogical theories in action. As Henderson says, “If you, as a teacher, are not thoughtful about your professional work, how can you expect your students to be thoughtful about their learning?” (1996, p. vii)

Our work as teacher educators is grounded in a marriage of theory and practice, and rooted in our own experience as classroom researchers, which set each of us on an academic path. This experience enables us to work both individually in the English Education and TESOL programs, and together to help teacher candidates in their respective fields understand ways of working together for the good of all of their students. Classroom research is an essential part of our students’ understanding of how to enact practice that is grounded in theory.

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