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Teacher Research: A Mind-Altering Experience

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As a regular classroom teacher, I have several roles. I monitor comprehension by asking lots of questions, gauging students' responses, giving assignments, etc. I am also part ringleader, asking students to follow me and trust me while we explore new genres and realms of literature. And I am also a warden, keeping track of behavior and making sure everyone is safe, on task, and in line.

A typical class might start like this. The bell rings and most students pull out their free reading books. Brian needs help finding the book on pirates that he was reading yesterday. If he doesn't find it soon, he's going to start yelling. Carrie is reading the same *Sammy Keyes* book for the third time, and I think she might be interested in something more challenging. I'm looking for Brian's book and a harder book for Carrie at the same time, when I notice Keith poking his neighbor again, and they're starting to have an argument. I intervene, then jot down the contents of the disruption so I can follow up with Keith's mom via e-mail during my planning time. She and I correspond several times a week. Mandy is tardy and refuses to read. She pretends to read her planner instead. By the time everyone is settled, I have three minutes to read on my own and model the behavior I'm asking of them.

When it comes time to write, similar behaviors appear. Most students follow my instructions and dive into the task, but inevitably, many lack the zeal for creating that I'd like to see. Jason will pepper me with questions to determine how little he actually has to do to get an A. Amy will write something wonderful but completely ignore the parameters of the assignment, and then

she'll cry when she receives a B. There's always at least one student, Amber this time, who will find her inspiration online and copy it verbatim. Many students simply regurgitate the examples I showed them. For the first few years of my teaching, I figured these little annoyances would disappear after I became a more experienced teacher. But in talking with other teachers, I learned that might not be the case. I needed to find another way to evaluate myself and see what I could change. That's when I found teacher research.

I entered into my first teacher research experience at the end of my master's degree program at Eastern Michigan University. I was beginning my fifth year of teaching, and, as I said before, I knew that there had to be something missing from my practice. I kept trying new lessons with varied success, but I didn't have the tools necessary to really evaluate my practice. Teacher research and the National Writing Project gave me those tools.

I participated in the National Writing Project Summer Institute at EMU in 2005, and through that group I joined a Teacher Research group led by Cathy Fleischer and Jennifer Buehler. Once a month, we gathered at Cathy's house for pizza and conversation. This group provided me with a whole new set of colleagues. It became important to me that we talked about our teaching practices, not specific students. When talking to my colleagues in my building, too often our discussions became about individual students. I was searching for something more comprehensive, something 'big picture.' We brought our field notes, our transcripts, our questions, our troubles, and our successes.

We each began by developing a central research question that would drive our individual investigations. What did we struggle with? What did we want to know? In our reading and discussions, we found that it was most helpful to start our questions with *What happens when?* *How do students react?* and *Why?* We knew that these questions would probably need revising as we gathered more information, but the questions were an important first step that drove us to find answers.

We each began with the easiest step: field notes. While students worked, I walked around

the room with my big spiral-bound notebook writing down what I saw and heard. These notes began to serve several purposes. First, I honed my observational skills. *Was Mandy really reading or just pretending? She didn't turn a single page in ten minutes. Matt always gravitates to books on war. Wow, Jason really dived into that myth writing assignment.* These types of observations found their way into my notebook for further reflection.

Second, the field notes allowed me to keep track of a lot of moments that otherwise would have been lost in the recesses of my mind. Not only did the act of taking notes help me remember a lot more of the minutia of class activities, but I was also creating a written record for me to review later. Third, taking field notes prepared me for the next tool of teacher research: interviewing.

At first, I would try to transcribe short conversations with my students just for practice. I realized that even short and simple conversations with my students could be interviews. Their answers to my questions, when viewed through the lens of a teacher researcher, were much more informative. Asking a student from the perspective of a teacher researcher not only allowed me to help that particular student begin her poem, but to also to learn more about her writing processes in general and the troubles that my other students were experiencing.

The snippets of conversations that I wrote in my field notes piqued my curiosity. I eventually conducted more in-depth interviews with five students. Three of these students were accomplished writers who were interested in talking about writing, and the other two were interested in the cans of pop I promised them for participating. The interviews provided me with a wealth of new insights and questions. Each student had a different pre-writing process, revision process, and different attitudes about how they preferred to write. I used the information I learned from them about pre-writing to structure the next writing assignment for all of my students.

Between the field notes and interview transcripts, I had a lot of information to go through. Looking at my notes, I started to see patterns. There were patterns in my methods of teaching, patterns of

student behavior, and patterns of literacy. Instead of keeping track of Keith's behavior so I could give his mother a full estimation of his disruptions, I could see what types of situations triggered his behavior. I could see that when I modeled what I expected from my students, they had fewer questions because they had a better sense of their end target.

I had information in the form of artifacts as well. Anything my students did could be considered an artifact, and I could look at it from a number of perspectives. As their regular teacher, I graded it, entered the grade, and made sure that if they didn't do well on the assignment that I had an opportunity for reteaching. As a teacher researcher, I could look to see what that piece says about my teaching, their learning processes, and where the successes and gaps between the two are.

Currently, I am in the middle of my study into genre and workshop instruction. I have taken field notes and collected artifacts. I have interviewed several students. I have informed consent permission letters from many of my students, and it is their work that I will scrutinize the most.

When I sit down to plan out a unit of instruction, I'm more careful about how I structure learning activities. Previously, the material and the GLCEs (Michigan Grade Level Content Expectations) served as a checklist of material for me to cover. By becoming a more self-reflective and aware teacher, I find planning easier and, dare I say it, enjoyable.

When writing my research proposal, I read a lot of books by authors I respect: Nancie Atwell, Linda Rief, Heather Mortimer, Laura Robb, Cris Tovani, and others. I read their books with awe in their accomplishments. However, I began to see a pattern. All of these authors that I've read and reread began where I am now. They began by examining their own classrooms and their own students for

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opportunities for progress and change. Many of them are still classroom teachers. It's exciting to think that we all begin with similar experiences and that I am beginning a journey, through teacher research, similar to theirs.

Keeping up with the methods of teacher research hasn't always been easy. There are large gaps in my field notes where I've reverted back to my old habits. I know that change, especially important change, is not easy, so it might take a while for my transformation into a teacher researcher to stick, but it's a challenge that I believe will pay off with increased achievement for my students and a keener sense of purpose for me.

What I find most exciting about teacher research is the opportunity to grow as a professional. By investigating my practices and outcomes, I am better able to adapt, clarify, and justify my methods.

I plan on sharing my findings in journals like this, with other professionals in my field. I also plan on providing copies of my work to other colleagues in my building, but also with my administration. I feel that it is important for my administrators to know that I am constantly trying to improve my methods and create the best learning environment for my students.

What would be wonderful is for my students' parents and other community members to know the extent of the work we do, such as teacher research. Many times, I feel as though the people who send their children to me know very little about what I actually do. I try to use my website as a way for parents and others to see what goes into learning in middle school. I intentionally create assignments that require students to use the class website because I hope they and their parents will examine the other features and information that I provide for them.

My hope is that when parents and other community members see that I am a professional educator committed to bettering myself and incorporating best practices into my teaching, they will show me, and other professional educators, a respect comparable to that of others whose experience and education mirror my own.

About the Author

Kristi Henry teaches English/Social Studies at Beach Middle School, Chelsea, MI. She is a 2005 Fellow of the Eastern Michigan Writing Project.