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TEACHER-OWNED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: THE ACTION RESEARCH MODEL

Kay Harley

The most effective form of professional development for teachers is that which involves them actively over an extended period of time in examining issues central to their teaching in the contexts of their own classrooms. "Ownership" is an important concept for writing teachers as they encourage students to take responsibility for their own ideas and choices when composing. Yet, as Garth Boomer has pointed out, few teachers are provided with the opportunity for "ownership" of their professional development.

Action research projects, also termed classroom-based inquiry or teacher-researcher projects, provide a professional development model in which ownership remains with individual or small groups of teachers. Teachers participating in such projects identify a problem about which they want to inquire. They then develop systematic ways to conduct their inquiry which involve them in planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Such activities put teachers at the center of their own learning. An outsider—a university researcher or a language arts coordinator, for example—may help initiate the project, but collaborative relationships need to be established for the project to succeed. In this way "the 'outsider' becomes a 'critical friend' helping 'insiders' to act more wisely, prudently, and critically in the process of transforming education" (Carr and Kemmis 161).

I became such a "critical friend" in initiating an action research group for teachers in local schools. Previously I had worked with many of these teachers through graduate courses, summer workshops, and the production of a videotape, "Writing: Teaching the Process," to be used for workshops in their school districts and teacher training at my university. All of us, however, felt a continuing need to reflect on our own practice in collaboration

with other teachers if we were to improve as writing teachers and grow as professionals in the field. We felt isolated in different schools, had no chance to observe each other's practice, and lacked scheduled time to meet, plan, and share our experiences.

Out of these needs the action research project emerged. Our attempts to gain funding were not successful, so I created a graduate course, "Teacher-Researchers in Writing," in which participating teachers could enroll. We met biweekly from September through April. In the future, we hope that such projects will be recognized as meeting professional development objectives, and, therefore, teachers participating can be supported by their school districts.

Participants in an action research project need some common ground. In our case, summer workshops or graduate courses provided an understanding of writing as a process and of the need for writing across the curriculum, familiarity with teachers' roles as writing models and writing coaches who confer with students on work in progress, an awareness of the benefits of allowing students to choose their own topics, a commitment to having students write for a variety of purposes and audiences, and knowledge of various evaluation techniques including grading for growth over time and using scoring guides for assigned writing. This common ground was important for our group because our teaching situations differed markedly, from 1st grade through college, and our individual projects also differed in focus.

In my role as initiator and coordinator of our "Teacher-Researchers in Writing" group, I presented a model of action research, building on the work of Stephen Kemmis, Kurt Lewin, and others. Lewin writes, "Educational action research projects derive from planned action which is implemented, and then systematically submitted to observation, reflection, and change." His action research model consists of four key elements: Planning, Acting, Observing, and Reflecting. As he points out, "Each of these four activities is not static, nor complete in itself, but part of the action research spiral. The cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting needs to be ongoing." To plan, a teacher-researcher has to:

1. Identify issues/problems that are central to his or her classroom.
2. Uncover assumptions.
3. Formulate researchable questions.
4. Identify appropriate modes of data collection.

Lee Odell suggests that research questions arise "from a sense of dissonance or conflict or uncertainty" (129). Through discussing, exploring opportunities, assessing possibilities, and examining constraints, our group began to identify problems about which we wanted to inquire. Narrowing the focus, formulating researchable questions, and choosing appropriate methodologies were difficult.

To gain perspective we read and discussed a series of articles relevant to classroom research on writing. We also explored classroom research techniques including questionnaires, teacher journals, case studies, tape and video recordings, interviews, and structured observation. In addition, I modeled the stages of action research through my own investigation of how changing the audience for journals through setting up peer dialogue affects the language and approaches students use to understand literary texts.

The following are examples of questions which emerged from our planning and guided our action research:

- What is the range of writing in a 1st grade writing process classroom?
- What questions do 2nd graders ask in writing conferences?
- Do learning logs foster the learning of science in 3rd grade?
- What are the reading/writing connections in the ability of 4th graders to write paragraphs developing a topic sentence?
- What are the features of undeveloped writing on 9th grade short essay exams?
- What are the sources of writing anxiety for high school advanced composition students?
- Will models of good reporting, awareness of professional standards, and understanding of the concept of audience improve the writing of high school yearbook students?
- Will intensive listening and copying of models of good prose improve the writing of a seriously remedial college freshman?

Once members of the group had identified their research questions, they went on to the second activity of the model, Action, by implementing their projects in their own classrooms. Some projects limited the "action" to a three week period; others extended it over six months.

Lewin describes the third activity, "Observing," as "collecting data and recording information and keeping a teaching research journal." While they

were implementing their projects, teachers monitored the effects of their action through gathering data in their classrooms. For example, they logged student questions, saved written drafts and final copies, copied student journal entries, tape recorded conferences, and administered questionnaires. While procedures for data collection had been formulated at the outset, the actual logistics often evolved with the project as we shared observation checklists and charting techniques that could allow us to gather data efficiently without neglecting our primary responsibility of teaching. As well as gathering data in our classrooms, we kept research journals in which we recorded not only "facts" about our classroom but also our reactions, dilemmas, surprises, and celebrations.

Through regular written progress reports to the group, we sifted, selected and organized our impressions into a more coherent form. Analysis and evaluation grow from such discussing, reflection, and rethinking. While we each had our own research focus, further understanding was stimulated by sharing our observations, data, and tentative analyses with others engaged in a similar process. Finally, from this reflective writing and talking grew more formal analysis and evaluation. We then shared our findings with others through presentations and publication.

By articulating our experience in the classroom, we came to a greater understanding of our own practice and an appreciation of the theory upon which it is based. By meeting regularly, we discussed our insights and problems with others engaged in similar situations. Despite the differences in our teaching contexts and specific projects, we worked from shared assumptions about writing and teaching and found our individual projects provided a specific focus around which far reaching discussions could center. We came to realize that such regular communication and contact with others is essential if we are to continue to develop professionally and understand how language learning is an on-going process initiated in early childhood and carried throughout schooling and later life.

Our group also discovered that to engage in action research requires a willingness on the part of teachers to learn about their own classrooms and a desire to develop themselves professionally. The insights gained do not always come easily; risk and pain may be part of the effort to improve our practice. However, the collaboration and support provided by an action research group composed of one's peers can strengthen and sustain our individual efforts to become better teachers.

In summary, classroom research undertaken by teachers is not only making important contributions to our understanding of the teaching of English, but can also provide an effective professional development model in that:

1. teachers "own" their professional development by defining and acting on issues they perceive as important to their teaching,
2. teachers re-examine issues central to their teaching in the contexts of their own classrooms over an extended period of time,
3. teachers read and critique the research of others as they engage in their own research,
4. teachers develop more informed judgments about the curriculum and a willingness to change practice, and
5. teachers contribute as professionals through presenting their research findings to others.

Action research projects thus give classroom teachers ownership of their professional development. Through systematic planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, kindergarten through college teachers can become "critical friends" who improve their practice through learning from themselves, from each other, and from their students.

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