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WINNING THROUGH ACTION RESEARCH: A YEARBOOK ADVISOR JOINS THE TEAM

Nancy Renko

As an elementary student I often played a little game with my teachers. I would try to second-guess them so that at the end of the day when they assigned the homework, I would already have completed mine. As a college student I perfected this routine so that I would know what questions would be on the exam. In this way, I began to develop an awareness and insight into classroom dynamics that put me at the center of my own learning. Little did I realize what an important role this awareness would play later in my life as an educator.

Ironically, now that I am a high school teacher, I find myself still playing a slightly different version of this sport. In my role as teacher, the name of the game is "Action Research," and I am both participant and winner. Now, instead of second guessing the teacher, I am engaged in a systematic process of inquiry that helps me to "make informed judgments about such things as how children learn, what the critical moments in this learning process are, and how and when the teacher should intervene so as to facilitate this process" (Nixon, 1).

Teachers need to be problem-solvers. How else could one maintain one's sanity and teach a schedule such as this: one section of general English, a junior high French class with three levels, a high school French class with four levels, and two sections of a combination yearbook and newspaper class? This was the task I faced as I entered the school year, and I found myself walking a tightrope of anxiety and apprehension. True, I had survived the year before with a similar schedule, but I had also spent until

the Fourth of July completing the yearbook in a marathon summer session. And this year I would be publishing a newspaper in addition to my other nine daily preparations.

Although I was overwhelmed by my schedule, I knew instinctively that getting my yearbook class under control would be the key to survival. Thus, I decided to focus my research on my most pressing needs as a classroom teacher: to complete the yearbook on schedule and make it a quality publication. Following the action research model established by Lewin (Kemmis, et al), I established a plan and determined three areas where I would "take action" to modify my teaching in the yearbook class. Then I monitored the results through carefully observing and documenting my teaching and the students' learning, revising my plan as necessary. The research model formed the impetus for a dynamic process of change in my classroom teaching.

I began my research by taking a hard look at what had happened in my classroom during the previous year. I assessed not only the performance of my students, but my own performance as well. I knew that there were some serious problems with the quality of writing and design in the last yearbook. Also, the inability to meet deadlines had caused tension and friction among the staff. Finally, there had been some emotional conflicts about who should be included and how much space should be devoted to certain topics or groups. I began to define some goals based on what had happened that year. I knew that as the adviser, I wanted to produce a book of which we could be proud. Meeting deadlines was a must; it was the only way to avoid burn out. Quality in writing and design were equally important, and fair representation for all students and groups was necessary too.

Armed with my problem solving mentality and the newly formulated needs assessment, my next step was to narrow these aims in order to make them realistic and attainable. I began to look for answers (as many teachers would) with the traditional methods learned in the education classes of yesteryear. I perused books and articles on producing yearbooks. I talked to professionals in the publishing business. I attended seminars. Still I did not have a plan of action. I was bothered by a nagging uncertainty about how I could accomplish all of my goals. Having exhausted all the traditional avenues, I discovered the solution quite by accident through becoming part of an action-research group. Several teachers who had been involved in "Writing Workshops" initiated the group in order to do research in their own

classrooms and to encourage each other in teaching writing. This was exactly what I needed in my second year as yearbook adviser. Now I had a support group, other professionals who had experienced in their own classrooms some of what I had encountered. In this group were the real experts, teachers who had taught journalism and who had developed writing programs in their schools' curricula.

The action-research model suggests that to form a plan involves "discussing, negotiating, exploring opportunities, assessing possibilities, examining constraints" (Kemmis 13). With the research group's help, I selected three areas where I could take action to modify my teaching. First, students need to recognize the standards set by professionals in the field of journalism in order to value their own work. Second, students should study models of effective writing to help them develop their craft. Third, students should learn to write for an audience so that their yearbook will have a strong reader appeal.

Thus the insight of those "inside" the classroom had made an impact that was to shape my journalism class. As researcher I knew that this was the critical moment and that intervention was the next step. I laid the groundwork carefully, making it clear to my students from the beginning that I expected quality work which would meet my standards as well as those set by the student editors. Students were required to sign a contract stating that they would meet deadlines, sell ads, redo work if necessary and produce a quality book that would serve all students and the community.

Now it was time to take action, concentrating first on achieving my goal of setting professional standards. Because of the problems I had encountered the previous year with missed deadlines and poor quality, I was determined to make a change that would positively address these errors. I was supported in this decision by my research group, which pointed out a clear need for improvement in this area.

I pursued this goal eagerly, displaying the plaque the '86 book had won and analyzing the five-page evaluation booklet used by the Great Lakes Inter-Scholastic Press Association in judging our book. We examined the criteria step by step, and I pointed out the strengths and weaknesses of the previous year's book. At the same time I was teaching how the publication was put together and other important topics such as theme development and design principles. In much the same way a good writing teacher uses analysis of

literary techniques, I used our analyses and critiques of other yearbooks (stored in my cupboards) as a springboard for discussion of standards in the field of journalism. We also entered monthly yearbook competitions in order to measure our book against other quality publications. The class chose the entries in each category by determining which pages would meet the standards set by the judges. They decided, for example, not to enter the very popular football feature with the trapped captions. Instead they opted for the technically perfect as well as informative millage feature. In this way the staff was beginning to become critical readers of its own work. Students began to take note of what was acceptable and not acceptable, pointing out flaws and asking for solutions to such problems as avoiding the verb "to be" and varying the beginnings of captions.

Soon a subtle change happened; instead of bemoaning the rewrites, students began looking for their own errors. They also began to formulate questions about their writing such as, "Do you think this is too wordy?" and "How can I make this into active voice?" I noted some of these questions in my research journal, pleased that students were really concerned about their writing. I observed a staffer who was assigned the opening page; the first thing she did was to find the evaluation booklet so that she would know exactly what was needed. When we received our first award for the millage feature, the class really paid attention. Students wanted to know if they would be marked down for trapped captions, violating internal margins, and other flaws they had once considered unimportant. As a result, the quality of their work increased perceptibly, as did their enthusiasm for the project. In addition to choosing to set their standards higher, staff members also decided they wanted to enter the yearbook in special award categories at the state level; as a result, we joined the Michigan Interscholastic Press Association so that our next publication could be measured against even more schools than before. I could see that we had indeed made some changes, and we were becoming a staff united in a common goal. The excitement was there, the attitude was positive.

Bolstered by the progress we had made in setting standards, I plunged wholeheartedly into the second action step of my research plan: providing my yearbook writers with models of effective writing. Once again, I stepped backwards before going forward. I examined the writing in last year's book and noted inaccuracies and misspelled names; I also remembered the frustrations of asking students to redo work that wasn't up to par. Determined to change students' attitude toward writing and revising, I made a

concentrated effort to provide models of effective writing to my students. In her book *In the Middle*, Nancie Atwell asserts, "One of the ways we can facilitate students' learning from other writers is by introducing well-crafted pieces they will care about enough to internalize as models" (246). If I wanted good writers, I had to expose my students to effective writing. I collected high school and college newspapers and yearbooks from wherever I could beg, borrow, or steal them. We set up a newspaper exchange with two other schools. Students were bombarded with writing. They began an in-depth study on types of leads and were required to find and label a variety of samples. Then students had to write their own leads. They wrote several types of leads for the same story. Students whose first drafts began with statements like, "This year's golf team had a disappointing season," revised their articles to read, "If you play a game it's fun, if you watch it it's recreation; if you work at it it's golf" (a quote from comedian Bob Hope). Another student wrote, "Red eyes, quiet sobs and lots of sheer disappointment— the game and a successful season ended abruptly."

The students saw that lead writing was actually fun. One article opened with this description of the basketball season: "The boys' basketball team is hungry; no, it's not a 'Big Mac Attack'." One aspiring writer started his article on the Knowledge Bowl competition with this query, "For ten points and a bonus question, what local gameshow pits area high schools in a battle of the minds for the chance to win a championship?"

As they tried out different ideas, Yearbook students frequently rummaged through my cupboards in search of other books and articles that would serve as models for their own writing. They also developed a critical eye toward some of the models and commented on layouts or copy they liked or disliked.

Thus I saw that providing models of effective writing truly helped to inspire and challenge my students to become better writers. They were writing and revising on their own and the deadlines were being met. It was no longer a struggle to finish a piece; instead, the articles flowed, and students enjoyed writing copy.

The final action step of my project was to show the students the necessity of considering their audience when they wrote. I saw this as a need because of the conflicts we had experienced during my first year as adviser when students differed about what topics should be covered and how much

space should be given to certain groups. As a problem-solver, I wanted to avoid the hard feelings and confrontations of the previous school year. I knew that these conflicts divided the staff and made working conditions difficult. I had discussed this with my research group, explaining that sometimes a yearbook promotes one particular group such as the "popular people" or "jocks." The students needed to broaden their perspectives by writing for their audience. Thus, we spent time doing an audience analysis. A teacher in my research group helped me by sharing the checklist she uses with her advanced composition students. I found the principles she uses were the same ideas I needed and used the checklist verbatim. Students were asked to assess the knowledge, attitudes, and needs of the yearbook readers. We did expand the list to include our advertisers, who make up a crucial part of the yearbook audience. We also brainstormed and discussed the interests of both the senior and the junior high students who make up our audience.

Most students were ambivalent about this issue at first. They seemed mostly concerned with how their friends would view their publication. However, they gained a sense of audience with the first distribution of the newspaper. They had instant feedback about inaccuracies in the basketball statistics and some missing names from one of the sports teams. The staff began to make the connection between their role as writers and the role of the reader. They conferred, trying out pieces on one another. They really took notice when it came time to count up the profits from the sale of the newspaper. Suddenly, whether or not the audience read their texts became a matter of financial security. They brainstormed for ideas to capture the audience's interest. They made sure to mention names in articles and to use quotes. They were indeed interested in gaining a broader readership.

When a conflict arose, the students' commitment to their audience was truly tested. One of the senior girls was not pictured on the varsity girls' basketball spread (except for the team picture) and she protested vigorously. Being a staff member, she had seen the layout and questioned the omission. The staff members were unanimous in their response. They pointed out the team was not only made up of seniors but included juniors also. They reasoned with her, insisting that they had a responsibility to their readers to cover the entire team and did not want to cater to staff members. She accepted their judgement without further dispute.

Once again I noted in my journal the critical moment described by Nixon; a breakthrough had happened. My students had learned to write for their audience and were truly committed to their readers.

Such moments as this, as well as the journal I used to record them, were important to me in my efforts to monitor and evaluate the project as it progressed—a central feature of action research. I knew my students were learning; I was learning too. I had grown as a teacher because I gained a trust in my students through their apt handling of this situation. I was beginning to balance my role as adviser and teacher. I could allow myself to step back and allow the students to step forward. I had, as Beasley and Riordan theorized, sharpened my critical awareness “through observation, recording and analysis of classroom events” (37). My consciousness was raised through studying what had happened in my classroom. I recalled the previous year when disputes caused strained relations, when power struggles seemed inevitable; yet, my students this year had triumphed over our first real conflict, demonstrating their commitment to their audience. I saw that they now realized how important their readers were.

Finally, I had observed and was able to document growth in all three areas of my project. I had been able to set professional standards which my students were upholding conscientiously. I had provided models of effective writing, and as a result student writing had improved. Lastly, I had helped my students to write for their audience and was confident in their commitment to their readers. I realized that these writing principles would be useful in any English class, not just the yearbook class, and began to implement them in my general English class as well. I ended the school year knowing that I had done more than merely survive—my action research had paid off!

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