

Risky Business

COLUMN

TEACHER RESEARCH

by Susan L. Lytle

Susan Lytle is director of the Philadelphia Writing Project (PhilWP) and of the graduate program in Reading/Writing/Literacy at the University of Pennsylvania. Her current research involves three PhilWP inquiry communities of urban elementary, middle, and high school teachers across the disciplines, as well as practitioners in the field of adult literacy. Her Inside/Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge, co-authored with Marilyn Cochran-Smith, has just been published by Teachers College Press.

The burgeoning literature of and about research by classroom teachers makes me at once excited and a bit nervous — excited because teacher research groups, in schools and out, are proliferating — and nervous because there seems to be relatively little talk about distinctions among the various “takes” on teacher research. These “takes” reflect the different roles individuals, groups, and institutions play in the invention of teacher research in particular contexts, and are likely to have radically different consequences for students’ learning, for the cultures of teaching, and for the reform of schools.

As inquiry becomes almost a buzzword, I find myself increasingly concerned about the risks inherent in teacher research becoming so common that it becomes mainstream, safe, even sanitized. I worry about a new orthodoxy, about invention and experimentation evolving too quickly into reified formats and teacher-proof cookbooks like those that followed upon early writing process research and that currently threaten the whole language initiative as it becomes the playground of publishers. I am also concerned that teacher research could become just another activity or project, an assignment or a topic in a college course, or another series of staff development workshops. It could become a way to create the illusion of support for fundamental change by “keeping the lid on” — by creating contrived contexts for collegiality, as Hargreaves (1989) has warned, without altering the structures that drive images of curriculum as knowledge transmission, that feed individualistic forms of professional development and that foster new hierarchies, dividing teachers from one another.

Teaching has long been a private and isolating profession. Yet teachers’ increasingly visible roles in collegial networks and their expanding participation in shaping restructured schools suggest that the mores of teaching are changing. As teachers reconfigure their work to emphasize its fundamentally social and political dimensions and as they struggle collectively to reframe classrooms and schools as sites of inquiry, there is an increasing need, it seems to me, for a critical discourse on how the concept of teacher research is being constructed differently by various teachers, teacher research groups, and university sponsors, and to what ends. To realize the promise of teacher research for dramatically altering practices of teaching and schooling, I think we need to explore in public forums how these differences may inform the ways that “the teacher research movement” gets forwarded, marginalized, critiqued, co-opted, trivialized and/or strengthened in the coming years.

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From working in teacher research communities in the Philadelphia area and hearing about the efforts of other groups, locally and nationally, I am more and more aware that teacher research isn't a loose (or even a rigorous) imitation of an academic's academic exercise in which often nothing much is immediately at stake in students' lives or in the cultures of teaching and schooling. The real stuff of teachers' research isn't "safe." It is radical and passionate, deeply personal and profoundly political — richly embedded in situations where the teacher's stance on her own practice and intellectual life *matter*, and where teachers' work lives, commitments, and relationships are complex and entangled. The real stuff, it seems to me, is about change and about action — teachers' purposes are not to *do research* but rather to *teach better* — and this is disruptive and risky business, indeed.

Uncommon Ground

Because school culture typically works against teachers raising questions and because many schools are organized to segregate teachers from one another, teacher inquiry groups can become vital intellectual communities, providing a rare context for co-laboring around issues and problems of common concern. As Pradl (1992, p. 318) has recently pointed out, we have come to realize that the most significant learning *requires* a co-dependency among learners — a relational context in which motives and actions are socially mediated and intentions and procedures negotiated. A researching community of teachers, then, needs to be fundamentally different from a graduate seminar. It is not simply a place where individual teachers investigate their own topics or issues, periodically using the group for support or as a sounding board.

To form and sustain groups that are more than loose collocations of disparate interests, teachers in the three communities I am working with in Philadelphia come together around a common inquiry, something designed as a context and frame for interrogating their day-to-day experiences in classrooms, as well as for mining their diverse responses to literature by other school and university-based researchers. Using these shared investigations to "stir the pot," they gradually establish ground rules for working together that privilege uncertainty, highlight differences, and keep the group or individuals within it from seeking premature closure on sensitive topics. The purpose of this common inquiry is to *make practice problematic*, which in our conceptual work on teacher research Marilyn Cochran-Smith and I (1992) define as "not taking the common arrangements of schooling as natural or inevitable, critically examining the ideologies and historical ante-

cedents of current practices and challenging rather than accepting prevailing explanations and attributions about the educational meanings and consequences of race, class, gender and ethnicity." Teachers do not typically come to these groups with predetermined questions that lead directly to individual research projects. Instead, the questions take shape as the community becomes an interactive setting for looking beneath the surface of their own schools and classrooms and for opening up unsettling subjects for which there are no other forums.

In Philadelphia, many of these conversations have been about the failure of schools to educate culturally diverse populations and about the profound disjunctions that often exist between home and school, community and school system, teachers and students, as well as teachers and their school and university-based colleagues. To discuss these issues openly in diverse groups of teachers means investigating the meanings of difference in teachers' and students' ethnicities as well as confronting limitations in peoples' knowledge about values and cultures different from their own. In these conversations teachers typically pose rather than solve problems, elaborate rather than narrow concerns, and often use systematic forms of oral inquiry to generate multiple perspectives for interpreting common experiences.

In exploring issues related to race and pedagogy, for example, racially diverse groups of teachers in all three of the Philadelphia communities are trying to understand how their differences have created gaps, and sometimes complicated bridges, between and among them and their students. They examine and compare different concepts of multiculturalism, interrogating the meanings of terms such as "culturally-relevant" and "culturally-responsive," both in the literature and in their own practice. From a range of disciplinary perspectives, they are exploring concerns about the canon — for example, what texts to read and with whom, the ways that differently positioned students read texts differently, and the possibilities of resisting readings of canonized texts. They read about and share firsthand experiences with the ways learners themselves construct race, class and gender, learning and literacy, language, power and schooling — at different ages and grade levels and within different racial and ethnic communities. And as part of their common inquiry, they write about times when school didn't fit *their* cultures and then use their own histories to make connections with students' experiences and with each other. Collaborative inquiries like these are risky in part because they are atypical — self-consciously di-

vergent rather than convergent, intended to provoke rather than obscure the deeply social and political nature of teachers' work and the cultures of teaching.

Questionable Practices

These conversations among teachers violate norms of privacy and individualism; in dialogue teachers work together to question common practice, examine their underlying assumptions, deliberate about what constitutes so-called "expert" knowledge, interrogate educational categories, and unpack the values and interests that are served through current practices of schooling (see Beyer [1986] and Carr [1986] for further development of this idea). Talking this way makes problematic much of what is usually taken for granted about teaching and learning and provides the "ground" on which the "figures" of questions more embedded in the particular lived experiences of participating teachers begin to surface and find form.

For many teachers, myself included, the more specific questions that guide inquiry emerge from contradictions in one's own practice. They emerge from what I learned to call in the Peace Corps a "felt need" — the gap between what you've got and what you want, the tension that emerges from the juxtaposition of classroom, school and community realities with one's own history as learner and teacher. Rather than asking generically "what works" or even "what's going on here," teachers are focusing their inquiries on what works in the complex dynamics of particular classrooms — i.e. what works for whom, under what circumstances, and in what ways — and what "working" means for various learners, parents, and others in the community. The questions reflect both an ongoing interest in the construction and reconstruction of intellectual frameworks to inform work over time and an inescapable responsibility to the here and now. The questions name distinctive concerns that reflect teachers' immediate, consequential relationships to learners' lives and to the practice of teaching.

In the teacher research community sponsored by the Philadelphia Writing Project and the Philadelphia Schools Collaborative (called the Seminar on Teaching and Learning) for example, teachers are trying to link inquiry and reform in comprehensive high schools involved in radical restructuring. A concern emerged from the group's exploration of issues related to cultural diversity that many of the administrative, curricular, and programmatic structures of high school either fail to provide or subtly constrain students' access to current and future educational opportunities. In inquiry projects conducted in the context of this seminar, five African-American women teachers at-

tempted to make these structures more visible by questioning premises and practices about placement, course selection, counseling, and appropriate pedagogy for learners in urban schools.

In the questions that framed these projects and in the projects themselves, it was evident that the teachers were not simply tinkering with instructional and organizational routines but rather were envisioning and creating new environments within which their students could be more successful in school and at the same time question the social structures of their own lives. These studies show how individual teachers and teachers working collectively can take action that interrupts the system by changing behaviors and attitudes. When they presented their work to their colleagues in the seminar, the group as a whole found the work so compelling and informative that they decided to make "access" and "obstacles to access" the focus of their common inquiry in the following fall. In this way, individual teachers' questions function to deepen and extend the knowledge base of the community and strengthen the possibilities for linking inquiry, action, and systemic reform.

Portrayals and Betrayals

When teachers pose and investigate risky questions in collegial groups, they make themselves vulnerable, opening up their classrooms and making the intimate spaces of teaching more visible to themselves and to more "public" audiences. With closer scrutiny comes the possibility of critique, the need for new ground rules, and often the delicate renegotiation of power relations between and among school-based teachers and students and their university-based colleagues.

Sharing research in progress, we are finding, is a complicated process of representing self to others, of recreating enough of the multiple layers of context so that listeners can understand the way teaching and learning are nuanced to particular settings. As in feminist and post-structuralist theory and research, teachers seek to alter relationships of researcher and researched and to make clear for their colleagues their positionings in relation to the data and to the issues as they have emerged over time. K-12 teachers in the Philadelphia group of the Urban Sites Writing Network, one of seven sites of a foundation-funded project of the NWP, for example, insist on the importance of the "story of the question," something which goes beyond knowing the person's background. As the group discussed at a recent meeting, teacher research blurs the distinction between research and practice so that the nature of one's practice shapes the research and the research shapes the practice. When teachers

tell each other the stories of their questions, these stories provide significant insights into who they are in their classrooms. There is thus a possibility, the group agreed, that something will be revealed that is not intended, for example, that the practices made “public” through the research appear incompatible with the teacher’s stated beliefs. Such discrepancies or perceptions of discrepancies highlight what some teachers refer to as the dangers of “putting themselves on the line” and the hazards inherent in “judging others.”

What’s evident here (and in other groups in which I work) is that researching one’s own practice involves not only revealing the contours of one’s teaching life over time but also portraying the experiences of students and the variable landscapes of a teaching context. As teachers in these communities have observed, teacher research is not all about good news, not simply about “revealed excellence.” At best, participating in a group and presenting to wider audiences increases teachers’ mutual dependence and trust. It entails the desire to give and get feedback, learning to negotiate the uncertain boundaries of collaboration and critique. These processes of “seeing collectively” may also reveal messy ethical issues in co-investigating school practices with students, or inadvertently may display students’ struggles in ways that reinforce stereotypes.

The consequences of “telling the truth” — about oneself and one’s students — often become particularly unsettling and even somewhat threatening when taking the data outside the group. Teachers attest to feeling extremely exposed in their writing in ways that academic researchers rarely if ever make themselves vulnerable. Through working in teacher groups and presenting in a range of professional contexts, they grapple with issues in the politics of representation involved in writing their own professional lives and the lives of their students into texts that may endanger the larger purposes that drive their work in the first place. Most agree, however, that telling only the good news, selecting safe subjects for study, and avoiding the task of developing standards of value and evaluation for teacher work — internal to the teacher community — would be to alter the researching act in ways incompatible with their personal/political stances and their commitments as educators.

Many of the risks teachers take entail boundary crossings and power negotiations that raise further issues. One such hazard is the possibility that universities themselves will pre-empt, neutralize, or even trivialize this work. Even as I struggle to create contexts for conversation at the university about activist scholarship and the viability of research in and on practice, I

am increasingly aware that my roles in and collaborative writing about different teacher research groups are not unproblematic. Like my school-based colleagues who are working to effect change, in traversing the worlds of schools and universities I am also moving in new spaces where disturbing questions of power, ethics, and epistemology are taking my work in new directions.

Across the country, teacher-researchers are reinventing practice by conducting systematic and intentional inquiries into their daily work. When communities of teachers stay together over time, they form relationships that interrupt the historic isolation of practitioners in schools, invent new ways of looking, and demonstrate the power of generating new knowledge from a field-based perspective. Rather than simply creating “feelgood” groups that feed a professional ethic of individualism, many teachers are making their research risky business. They are taking on the hard social and political issues that inform instruction, surfacing deep questions that involve disclosure of the intimacies of their daily practice, and in gutsy ways daring to write, present, and publish their work for wider, often unknown audiences — efforts which further the radical and transformative agenda for social change inherent in the teacher research movement.

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