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Teacher Research--What It Is, and What It Is Not

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This article describes the beginnings of a teacher research definition, derived from the experiences of participants in teacher research seminars and participatory research projects, as well as observations from continuing involvement with teacher researchers.

I have taught a teacher research seminar at the Claremont Graduate School for several years now. In the past I have supported teachers' investigations, visited classrooms, suggested research methods and examples of relevant research, and edited the researchers' papers into a publication. This year I promised the participants I would also write a paper.

Because I have taught the course several times now, written about teacher research for various forums, worked with teachers in a four-school participatory research project, and presented at innumerable conferences with teacher and parent researchers, I had the gall to assume writing such an article would be easy. So much for my never-ending naiveté.

At the beginning of the summer, after reading the seminar participants' first drafts of their project papers, I dug out my folder labeled "Teacher Research Article." I had been dropping scraps of wisdom and insights into this folder for several years. In my imagination it was a repository for a grand article about teachers doing research in their classroom --on the insights they bring to teaching, the methodological implications of their work, the theoretical underpinnings. I read the contents, a varied collection. My notes included some good suggestions about how to improve the course and ideas for helping teachers struggle with sense-making while immersed in the density of classroom data. There were interesting insights, some so interesting I had re-invented them several times. The notes included plans for future courses and research, and quotable quotes. I lay them all out, read through them jotting down ideas, and began to write. Teacher research was familiar enough and my fundamental understandings and beliefs in it strong enough so that I was certain that important concepts, and possibly even some beginning theories, would start to emerge as I told the story of the last few years. But the paragraphs I wrote were fragmented and led me no where.

In July the teacher research seminar met for a group editing session, and in September the seminar participants began to submit their final drafts. I still had very little on paper, although by then I had started the article several times. I headed for a month of research in China in mid-fall, carrying with me the "Teacher Research Article" file and some related materials. And it was only there, with the luxury of both cultural and physical distance, that I was able to recognize the nature of some of the roadblocks I had been confronting.

The problem seemed to be similar to what I had faced as a beginning, isolated teacher researcher several years ago in my bilingual, first grade classroom. I could not find the big patterns I had hoped for, and I did not know what questions to ask. I was stuck.

In my classroom I had been curious about how thirty-five first graders interacted with each other and how they used materials for learning. I had organized a set of Rube-Goldberg-type equipment to videotape my students. At the end of each day I had rushed home to make my discoveries, to see for the first time all those things I had been unable to observe while engrossed with teaching. But I found no grand patterns or "truths." I watched the tapes multiple times. I ran them forward, and backward, hoping to glimpse patterns of interactions I had missed while teaching. But, to no avail, and my frustration eventually led me to a doctoral program.

A few years later I decided that what I had been missing was someone to help me ask the right questions in my classroom as well as knowledge about theoretical perspectives that could inform my work (Pine 1992). At that point I worked with some theories that helped me develop the teacher research courses, and later, while coordinating the Voices from the Inside project, I learned more thoroughly how participatory research and connected theory could help those in schools uncover knowledge in classrooms (Pine 1994). But here I was, stuck at the same point again.

What struck me in China was that I was unable to see any grand patterns and theories, and in fact, I had put the cart well down the road in front of the horse. What I needed to do, I realized, was follow my own advice which I have so freely given to seminar participants. "Keep your project small," I can hear myself saying. "Look at a specific situation." "Don't try to solve all of education's problems at once." The participants have become quite skilled at letting a particular situation tell a story. If there are generalizations to be made, they flow from those small beginnings. If they do not emerge, so be it. They are willing to not force them.

The complexity and "messiness"* of data-laden classrooms provides a context for insights. It is from this messiness and the dialogue of the investigation process that insights and change seem to emerge. In teacher research the richness of this messiness and complexity joins with multiple notions of university research, to create a fabric laden with potential, but which can overburden individual capabilities--or be trivialized and categorized into ineffectual generalities. In my early attempts at this article, I was trying to find grand schemes, and overarching insights, and was reaping nothing but vacuous or fragmented generalities. I had ignored my own advice to teacher researchers to gather knowledge from specific happenings and observations and let new insights emerge if they will.

With this realization, I began again. This time I looked more methodically and in more detail at my notes, at teacher researcher comments written during the seminars, and at the insights of other teachers, school staff and parents involved in conscious, deliberate investigations of schooling. I looked at what was there, rather than for generalizations that would have been insubstantial at this early stage. I looked for clusters of ideas and comments, and eventually two underlying themes emerged: (1) a strong, persistent belief in the importance of teacher or participatory research for those who engage in it, and (2) fragments of definitions of what teacher research is, and is not. At this point, I decided to discipline myself to describing and partially defining teacher research, relying on the words of those inside schools as well as my own recorded observations made over the past five years.

The first theme, the importance of teacher research for those who engage in it, is quite straightforward. The participants--be they participatory research teams in schools or

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* Lamb uses this term in relation to linguistic networks, networks that do not fit neat, linear or previously developed organizational structures (see Regan, Stephenson & Pine, in press), and I believe it is an especially appropriate term here.

teacher researchers in a course--put in quantities of work, and they gain considerable self-esteem and knowledge. They talk about how much they have learned and how important this investigative experience is for them. The second theme requires much more effort to explicate, for definition of teacher research is in a fragmented, ill-formed state. I am not reaching for a definitive definition, but rather our understandings of what teachers, parents, and staff accomplish when they investigate learning in their own schools and classrooms and what its practitioners experience during and after it.

The Power of Teacher Research

While immersed in teacher research, participants can see their own knowledge evolving, and recognize how rich and valuable it is. As one teacher wrote, "There is serious stuff happening here. I have learned a lot from my colleagues around this table, about learning, teaching, and changing." Seminar participants see the stories of their teaching merge with other stories and develop over the year, and it helps them "make sense of the otherwise random, fleeting moments, half noticed events, and not quite understood occurrences."

Teachers have talked about how investigating their teaching or coming to grips with understanding a student builds professional confidence. As they become more confident, teachers are able to talk with assurance about professional decisions and ask compelling questions. Says one, it gives me the "language and confidence I didn't have before." And another, "It gives me the ability to explain to someone--the principal, another teacher, a parent--why I have decided to proceed in a certain way with a child or a group of children or the class."

It is energizing. The teacher research environment, comments one, "has caused an explosion of energy toward continuing, self-directed learning." Discussing investigations in groups provides positive feedback in a profession that gives little or no meaningful feedback to adults. The community of knowledge-seekers compels its participants to think more, to ask more and more questions. "What surprised me most is what a powerful learning experience [the course] has been. We shared things we read as well as our own experiences. We were able to question and clarify as we talked. After classes the thinking about what happened in our discussions remained fresh in my mind as I drove home, arrived at work, returned home in the evenings. The desire to follow up on questions made reading a joy."

Although teacher or participatory research may not be for everyone, it seems to change those who embrace it--increasing their professional confidence and their abilities to seek out knowledge in new ways and from those whose voices have seldom been heard.

The Defining of Teacher Research

The defining of teacher research is the more difficult theme to get on paper in a comprehensive form. Participant observations, and my own, provide only fragments. The categories I have found are drawn from insights of teachers and parents I have worked with and from my own experiences as a teacher researcher and coordinator of teacher and participant research projects. The following is *not* a full definition, but rather the early delineation of some, but probably not all of its components. It is also limited to what is usually called "teacher research" that occurs in classrooms and schools, rather than participatory research which envelops a varied group of social structures including agricultural development projects, cooperative business ventures, and other non-school venues. I have begun with what teacher research is not, and then moved to what it is, because as I have participated in conferences and answered increasingly more questions about teacher research, I have become aware that some people within school structures are asking it to be things that it is not.

What Teacher Research Is Not

1. Teacher research is not university style research, although it uses techniques and methodology from it. It has more to do with teachers and schools in transformation and creating professional support and insight, than with university-style research.

2. It does not necessarily begin with a research question, although questions may emerge that later help focus research projects.

3. It is not limited to the study of literacy and writing. Ten years ago writing projects dominated teacher research, and these projects continue to produce well-written materials. (See, for example, Goswami & Stillman, 1987; Hollingsworth, 1994.) Now staff in other curriculum areas, as well as those concerned with equity issues and structural reform have become more prominent. Such projects as the Philadelphia Teachers Cooperative, with its on-going study group (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992); the Voices from the Inside project which involved over 250 teachers, administrators, aides, nurses, some parents, and others in a participatory research project to name the problems of schooling from inside schools (Poplin & Weeres, 1992); Eleanor Duckworth's moon group which studied science (and pedagogy) for several years (1986) are some of the better known, in large part because their experiences have been described in print. Many more, however, remain unknown to the general public--for example, a long-term collaboration between elementary teachers in the Pasadena Unified School District and the University of Michigan faculty in which teachers are using teacher research to develop assessments for the inquiry science units they teach. And interest is increasing. Teacher research is being looked at for state curriculum initiatives, new teacher evaluation procedures, individual schools looking at change, foundations wanting feedback about school change.

4. Teacher research cannot be successfully legislated from the top down, unless there is great willingness among the people in the top structure of the organization to listen to the messy questions that get raised and the inconclusive answers that emerge, or more likely, the new sets of questions that evolve from investigations.

5. It cannot be a formula, for a formula will miss the power of internal questioning and transformation.

6. It is not a means for evaluating teachers or forcing them to change their ways, although people change when they participate in it.

7. It is not merely intuition, as Lytle and Cochran-Smith pointed out some time ago (1990). It goes beyond that to more conscious questioning, probing, and analysis.

8. It is not action research, although there is considerable overlap between action research and teacher research. They both occupy slightly different positions in the same terrain, and it would be counterproductive to set up an either/or, dichotomous relationship between the two. From my perspective, action research tends to be more directly purposeful. In my conversations with people during the last several years, action research appears to be viewed as more linear, having a finite life. It has a definite beginning and an end; it has an answerable question. Teacher research, on the other hand, seems to be more open-ended. Participants, although seeking specific solutions and working toward understanding specific puzzles and problems, are engaged in developing ways to view the world as an investigator. Teacher research is much more a process, with no end and with beginnings that have their roots in the fundamental questioning nature of teachers. Teacher research seeks answers, but often to unanswerable questions; it is often a describing of insights culled from investigations rather than, "this is the answer to this child's problem." It is a way to learn more about one's students, about how education happens, about how we as teachers function within the classroom.

9. I want to muddy the waters by pointing out that it is much more than teacher research that is being described here. It is perhaps, more broadly speaking, participatory

research focused in schools. Many school staff, who are not teachers, have participated. This year, for example, a parent has joined our seminar, and has helped us see the school world from a different perspective as a result. The Voices from the Inside researchers were primarily teachers, but also included aides, administrators, some parents, office staff, nurses, a custodian, and others in the school community. We need to keep aware of this, of the wealth brought by multiple perspectives. But we also must be cognizant that various roles have different requirements and require different areas of expertise. Our initial aim, I think, should therefore be to understand these roles within a trusting, if sometimes difficult dialogue situation.

What Teacher Research Is

1. Teacher research is a quest to ask more than daily questions. To *probe*, to not be satisfied with first answers. It goes beyond responses to "can you give me an idea of how to teach fractions better," although that type of question might well be the beginning of a discussion that leads to more fundamental issues about teaching and learning.

2. It is a way to get beyond the classroom loop of reaction igniting reaction. It provides a means for stepping back and saying, What am I doing? How can I understand what this child is doing? How can I "just look" and learn from my students, their parents, my teaching?

3. It gives teachers courage to experiment, to question, and to risk. "It encourages me to try new things, and explore." It is a place where questions are generated and discussed, and new questions uncovered, a place to think about problems and gain perspective for further observation. It provides a chance to explore and implement within a forum of trust.

4. It is a fledgling field, with little definition and considerable accusation that it is not "real research," that it is not Big-R, university research.**

5. In our course it has meant learning to apply various university research techniques as a means for understanding classroom practice, but in ways that are often not traditional. The teacher researchers, in my experience, use research forms in ways that would not be acceptable in a dissertation process. There is nothing dispassionate in their daily interactions with students and teachers and parents. They are often trying to distance themselves, some, but while remaining very connected to the realities of their research. They are in the crucible of meaning-making every hour or every day, and it is this intensity that drives their investigations, their questions. Although research provides them with means for looking anew, for questioning, that questioning and looking is intimately linked with the intensity of their daily lives. It is not leaving this intensity and becoming "objective" that gives power to their work; it is precisely the intensity, the lived nature of their work that gives vibrancy and insight. (See Heshusius, 1994.) In future, if teacher research becomes a developed means of inquiry, located somewhere between intuitive response and Big-R research, it may have the potential to help extend and deepen university research.

6. For many teachers, it increases their awareness of how they teach, of what their students are learning, and of how to improve. As one teacher put it, "it keeps me engaged with my students in a completely different way from any other way of being in my classroom." And another added, it is a way to see "the realities of the classroom more thoroughly."

A teacher research group is a place "where I can become an active learner, and inquirer, blending empirical studies and my own ideas." It is a place for teachers to discuss

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** For a description and discussion of this issue see, for example, Berthoff, 1987; Boomer, 1987; Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1990; Pine, 1992).

why and how children do certain things. A place to learn how to improve teaching. "It is a 'hands-on' 'learning centered' process that has made me more aware of what and how I am teaching."

It has a *practical* use, providing teachers the opportunity to discover ways to gain information about their students and how to teach them in the best ways. "The more I can articulate what happens in my classroom, the more I learn to communicate with my students. As I see them I can share with them what I see." "It is a way to get past stereotypes." "It forces me to learn from my students." What I produce "benefits my students," "may be helpful to others," and "it is certainly helpful to me."

7. It is a means to ground teachers in important issues. As one seminar participant said, "In a profession that is fraught with minute to minute distractions, teacher research gets me back on track so I focus on the bigger picture." A teacher research discussion group can help focus on meaning, and push back the all-encompassing nature of institutional demands.

8. It opens up the benefits and possibilities of observational and analytical techniques. Participants talk of the importance of learning to observe and how to discuss it, to reflect on it; on how students and teachers actually work together in the reality of the classroom. It helps participants look at these things from different perspectives, to understand better "how certain puzzling children work."

9. Teacher research creates a community, and the power of such a community cannot be underscored enough. It is more than the sum of its parts. It is present wherever trust and questioning and careful observation and noticing come together--in teacher education courses, in the teacher research seminars, and in long-term investigations such as Voices from the Inside. It seems to generate a professional community that strives to dig deeper and ask harder questions. Participants have written about the importance of the years of varied experience brought to teacher research seminars, and as one summed it up, "What powerful thinking and inventing goes on in this group!"

Those who are involved in these groups want to know more about the process of education and are able to explore it over time. When I tried alone in my living room to see patterns in my video tapes, I had no one to help me ask useful questions, no one to say "what if..." or "did you notice...." When Irene and Linda showed their video tapes in the seminar this year, the whole group generated questions and noticed interesting ways that students interacted with each other. As a community, the seminar group could struggle toward understandings.

The community is created in part by taking the time and effort to discuss and share, with others committed to educational improvement. "My school has no time to discuss education in an intellectual, open way" is a comment I often hear. The opportunity to talk with others who are doing the same thing is very important. But it is more than that. The quality of discussion does not happen until a group digs deeply into educational issues. It does not emerge from complaint sessions or discussions of daily problems that never reach beyond the immediate situation. Although it may grow from the tedious or mundane, it does not remain there. It reaches toward fundamental issues--both human and pedagogical.

Conclusion

I realize I have not come as far as I would like toward defining teacher research, I believe partly because its definition requires the carving out of new territory in the education world. It requires a territory in the schools which welcomes hard questions and allows for the fact that we do not have all the answers to educational problems. It also needs to carve out a territory in the area of "research" and traditional notions of what that should and should not be. I sense this is the beginning of a discussion, not the end.

Teacher research creates a safe place for questioning, for not having all the answers, for learning how to be more honest with ourselves and with our successes and failures. It

uses university research techniques, but it is not about turning teachers into dispassionate university researchers. It is, in my limited experience, about developing long-term confidence in the necessary questioning, and requisite honesty, required of teaching well.

The poignancy of teacher research is the self-immersion and the learning to step back just far enough from that daily passion and exhaustion, to see oneself and one's students in a new light. But in my experience it is the class, the group seminar, the all-day retreat that does this. One seminar leader could never accomplish it. It takes the expert insights of all the participants to move the insights forward.

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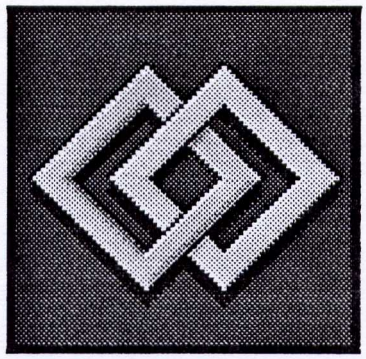
Participatory Research: Digging Deeper into Classroom Realities



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