Sarah Warshauer Freedman

UNIVERSITY AND CLASSROOM TEACHER: RESEARCH PARTNERS

During June, the Bay Area Writing Project sponsored a week-long workshop for eight teachers interested in conducting research projects in their classrooms and in their schools. In the process of planning and carrying out the workshop and working with some of the teachers in a follow-up program during the year, I have learned several lessons about teacher research.

In the workshop, my philosophy was to teach about research by having the teachers begin playing the research game, even though some knew none of the rules. All members of the group played, including me, and those of us with the most experience made sure that the others followed the rules. I instructed only after we had begun to play; then I would explain as needed. Each teacher came in with an area of interest and an idea for a research project or a desire to do research in writing. Except for two outings—one to a BAWP talk I gave in which I reviewed research findings of importance to classroom teachers and another to the computer center to see the available resources for word processing and statistical analyses—we stayed in our classroom and played the research game ourselves.

Each teacher presented his or her ideas during either a morning or an afternoon session. After each presentation, we collaborated to help the presenter shape researchable questions and develop methods to answer the question(s). After each presentation, we generalized about "rules" of doing research. During the week, each teacher kept a research journal, and at the end of the week, we bound the research summaries into a book, set up timetables for each project, and made plans for meeting in the fall. We decided to hold monthly group meetings throughout the academic year and for me to have individual consultations with teacher-researchers between meetings as needed.

The projects of three of the teachers illustrate how different teachers enter the workshop at different stages in the research process and how the research pace differs for different teachers. Pat McGrath entered the summer workshop with a partially complete project. She and a Hispanic counselor at Chabot Community College had established an experimental program for Hispanic students. At Chabot, 50% of the entering Hispanic students drop out of school,

with 39% dropping out in their first quarter. Another 18% have less than a 2.0 GPA. When they take academic courses, which is seldom, their average GPA is 1.2. Pat's program, the Puente Project, was established to combat these trends. The program links the college students with successful Hispanics in the community who serve as mentors, and provides intensive instruction in expository writing.

Before coming to the workshop, Pat had begun to gather statistics about her students and had collected writing samples at the beginning and end of the project. During the workshop she learned how to analyze her statistics and began to develop strategies for analyzing changes in the students' writing across time.

Pat's most recent statistics document the success of the Puente project. Not only did her students stay in school (only a 12% drop rate in the first quarter as compared to the usual 39%) but they also raised their GPA significantly and began to take more academic courses. They began with a cumulative GPA of 1.64; one year later their cumulative GPA is 2.72. Even more impressive, in their first quarter in the program, the eighteen students were enrolled in eighteen academic courses between them, an average of one per student. In the second quarter, they passed thirty-eight academic courses. They are currently enrolled in fifty-eight. So the rise in GPA is accompanied by enrollment in more difficult courses. Pat also found that holistically scored pre/post writing samples showed significant improvement.

Armed with documentation of the overwhelming success of her program, Pat has applied for a substantial grant to implement the program at three other local community colleges, to continue monitoring the programs' successes and failures, and to produce a publication explaining how to implement similar programs. Pat has completed parts of her research, to the point of publishing a description of the program; she has planned the statistical evaluation of her programs at other community colleges, and she is planning a qualitative evaluation.

Unlike Pat, Sharon Bergstrom began the workshop with little idea of what she wanted to do other than that she wanted to do research. During the summer, our group discussions helped her focus her interests and plan a project. She decided to examine how writing for real audiences affected students' motivation to write and their growth as writers. She was particularly interested in low achieving secondary students. Modelling her study in part after a letter-writing project Shirley Brice Heath conducted with an Alabama secondary teacher, Sharon decided to have her high achieving eleventh graders, who were enrolled in a one semester short story course, correspond with ninth graders in a basic skills section.

She has planned the correspondence carefully; not only will the students have an audience but they also will have a purpose for writing. The eleventh graders need to gather material about human experiences to help them interpret their short stories, and they need to assess the effects of the short stories they write on an audience. The ninth graders need help with their writing.

Sharon is pleased with the enthusiasm of her students for the project; their pen names illustrate their involvement—eleventh grade "Rock Bottom" is writing to ninth grade "Pan, God of Passion and Love." Sharon will assess the students' attitudes and will compare her students' scores on school-administered holistically scored beginning and end of year essays with the scores of students from a control group. In addition, she will analyze changes in the students' letters, using a system of analysis similar to the one Shuy and Staton (1981) use to analyze dialogue journals.

Mary Ellen McNelley came into the workshop with a specific area of interest for her research but with no concrete plans. She had a better idea of what she wanted to study than Sharon did. She knew that she wanted to look closely at the reading logs of her tenth and eleventh graders because she felt that hidden in these logs was evidence of their cognitive growth. For her research, she wanted to specify what in the journals marked cognitive growth; she also needed to figure out a way to analyze the journals so that she would be able to see evidence of growth.

During her sabbatical leave this fall, as she has continued to think about her ideas for research, she has decided that she also wants to figure out what kinds of questions to ask students to trigger evidence of their maximal cognitive abilities as well as to learn how to spot evidence as it occurs. Thus, instead of performing a linguistic analysis on the journals she already has, she will use them to gather ideas. When she returns to school this spring, she will experiment with ways to elicit different kinds of responses, ones that bring out the abstracting abilities which students at this age are capable of. With her new logs, she hopes to identify, specify, and be able to say something about how to promote cognitive growth through having students write about literature. Mary Ellen is still in the planning stage of her research.

What did I learn from my experiences with these teacher-researchers? What I did not anticipate was the fact that different teachers need to be at different stages in the research process. I thought that each teacher would come during the summer, plan a project, and conduct it during the next year. Such was the case with Sharon. But others like Pat needed to shape projects that they had already begun. And others like Mary Ellen need time to reflect and plan.

Besides coming in at different stages in the research process and working at different paces, they have different interests and talents. In order to guide them so that they could capitalize on both their interests and their talents, I encouraged them to develop projects that required different combinations of research methods—linguistic, psychological, anthropological, and so on.

I next learned that teacher-researchers, like other serious researchers, can enrich their research by being able to take advantage of the resources of the University. Besides the summer workshop and the continuing guidance that I will offer during their research, we identified additional resources some would need to complete their projects—e.g., advice from other faculty members, coursework, computer use, library use. To provide these resources, I arranged for all teachers conducting research to become Teacher Fellows at Berkeley. This status is similar to the status of a Visiting Scholar and allows the teachers full access to the University. The University does not pay such visitors nor do visitors pay the University. Rather the University acts as host for a time and provides course auditing privileges, library privileges, and if possible, office space.

A final lesson I learned has to do with the psychology of the teacher first beginning a research project. For this lesson, I draw on knowledge of teachers who are potentially interested in joining a workshop such as the one I conducted as well as those who were part of the group this summer. Among our Writing Project teachers, there is lots of interest in research as well as apprehensiveness about getting involved in yet another project. Most teachers don't, on their own, flock to a teacher research program, perhaps because they don't automatically see themselves as researchers. The Northern Virginia Writing Project has worked diligently and successfully to stimulate interest in teacher research. At Berkeley too, we have begun to work consciously to change teachers' self-images so that they see themselves as researchers or potential researchers. We also want them to become critical consumers of research. Thus, we want to stimulate their interest both in reading research and in doing it. As a first step, this summer we added a research component to the Invitational BAWP Summer Institute. Every week either Mary K. Healy or I gave a presentation on an aspect of research in writing. Topics included what research has to say to teachers, how to read research critically, how to form researchable questions. We also presented examples of research other teachers at Berkeley and those across the nation and in England are conducting. We found that once introduced, the idea of reading and doing research is appealing, both because it offers potential intellectual stimulation and political power. Making research doable by providing intellectual resources seems to go a long way toward alleviating the apprehension.

Also, this year we are experimenting with another way to make the beginning research process manageable and rewarding for classroom teachers. We call this type of beginning research "teacher inquiry;" it is modelled partially after other teacher research programs in this country (Northern Virginia, Boothbay) and "action research" programs in England and Australia. In our inquiry program, teachers begin with introspective projects. They keep journals about their process of learning to write and they observe their classrooms systematically. This program helps them generate ideas for projects. The teachers who begin with inquiry projects may find researchable questions, may begin viable research projects, or may do neither. Regardless, they will learn about their own teaching through observing themselves and their classrooms more carefully. We expect the teachers with promising projects or motivation to learn more about the research enterprise to apply to join the next summer research workshop.

I find the analogy between learning to write and learning to do research informative. Our writing improves, just as our research does, as we gain experience. Practice alone is not sufficient, nor is work with peer groups; the expert guidance of a teacher is necessary for the learner. One learns by going through the entire process from prewriting through rough draft writing, from introspection, to formulating researchable questions, to designing and carrying out a study to answer those questions.

A final note. Teacher research looks just like any other research and has the same goals as other research. Like other research, it has its exploratory or "inquiry" phases and its final phases. Like other research, some is better than others. Like other research, regardless of the quality for the final product, the researcher learns from the process.

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