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HANDBOOK OF RESEARCH ON TEACHING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

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...there is no such thing as teaching without research and research without teaching. One inhabits the body of the other. As I teach, I continue to search and re-search. I teach because I search, because I question, and because I submit myself to questioning. I research because I notice things, take cognizance of them. And in so doing, I intervene. And intervening, I educate and educate myself. I do research so as to know what I do not yet know and to communicate and proclaim what I discover. (Freire, 1998, p. 35)

Far from the common conception of a theory and practice divide in education, Freire (1998) frames teaching and research as intimately connected. He highlights the mutually informing nature of actions that include teach, notice, search, research, intervene, question, educate oneself, communicate, and proclaim. While these actions appear naturally linked for Freire, many teachers benefit from processes and tools that forge links to connect such actions. Among these processes is teacher inquiry. Grounded in Deweyan perspectives and reflective practice (Schön, 1983), teacher inquiry typically includes positioning practitioner as researcher rather than object of study, collaboration of participants in formal or informal inquiry communities, systematicity in gathering and analyzing data, and development of an inquiry stance of asking critical questions about practice and schools (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Gore & Zeichner, 1991; Goswami, Lewis, Rutherford, & Waff, 2009; Valli et al., 2006). Some models and practices also foreground social justice as an inquiry goal (Fecho & Allen, 2003).

How has such inquiry been conducted by educators? How does inquiry serve teachers and their students? How might inquiry processes and products contribute to larger knowledge communities in education? These are questions I consider in this chapter. Though methods I discuss have been applied to practitioner inquiry beyond classrooms, I highlight studies in K–12 English language arts (ELA) classes conducted by teachers of those classes. I generally use the more specific term teacher inquiry, drawing on a review of inquiry reports; studies of products and processes; and personal experience with inquiry curriculum development, teaching, and research in preservice. I highlight purposes and methods with ELA examples, raise issues, report innovations, and suggest ways to move ahead methodologically as a form of ELA research.

Dialoguing of Theory and Practice: How Teacher Inquiry Can Promote Praxis

Unlike much academic research arising from gaps in research knowledge or in theory development, teacher inquiry begins in practice. Inquiry often yields descriptions of practice and case studies, initiated in and often responding to a puzzling moment, event, or student (Ballenger, 2009; Gallas, 2003; Griffin, 2004). Puzzling moments lead the teacher to a focus or problem framing, followed by the collection of data that may include fieldnotes, interviews, taped discourse, and records of student work, interactions, and performance. The goal of such inquiry is development of new knowledge about a learner, a group of learners, or learning and teaching processes, and often for use in direct action. Often teacher inquiry moves from problem framing to specific designs for action to improve students' opportunities and achievement. Such work often includes baseline and exit data, generally in the form of student work, to frame actions or innovations designed to achieve results. Teachers who engage in multiple rounds of inquiry report a dynamic and dialectical tension between doing and reflecting on doing (Freire, 1998). Using analytic tools to examine artifacts of instruction and student behaviors and perceptions can promote conscious understanding to guide future actions and may lead to a kind of theory level of logical ordering and coherent framing to deeply understand a variety of similar situations (Korthagen, 2010). This theorizing also enables praxis, practice or action informed by knowledge and notions of change.

The notion of praxis began with Aristotle’s work to
categorize three basic human activities, each with its own corresponding knowledge and goals. *Theory,* or to view, spectate, or contemplate with clarity and dispassion, featured the theoretical, with the goal of truth. *Poiesis,* or to produce, featured the poetical, with the goal of making or creating. *Praxis* featured practical knowledge with the goal of action. Some definitions reduce praxis to application of theory, a unidirectional, top-down model of knowledge originating in contemplation and theory. However, many conceptions of praxis view theory and praxis as mutually informing, functioning in a recursive manner. Praxis, in such a view, is practice that is part of a system of critical reflection on action, in service of generating new knowledge and theory to again shape transformed action.

Many fields view praxis as actions textured with conscious thought. In fields as diverse as economics, political science, occupational therapy, theology, computer science, theatre, and curriculum theory, praxis signifies actions shaped by ideation, reflection, and planning. It is often informed by conceptual knowledge and, in some cases, prompted by concerns of social justice. Praxis in teacher inquiry is committed action informed by reflection, histories of educational ideas, nested contexts, and new knowledge constructed through systematic inquiry with data. One teacher researcher described how inquiry promotes theory and practice as mutually informing:

> Each shapes the other. My current understandings about how literacy is taught and learned shape decisions about my practice; my implementation of those decisions, aided by systematic reflection, further shapes my evolving theory. At times in this process, I have entered into a state of grace as theory and practice elegantly dialogued around me. At other times, I have limped along badly, aware of gaps and inconsistencies in the work of the classroom as it related to my theoretical understandings. (Fecho, 2004, p. 29)

Fecho’s (2004) gaps and inconsistencies echo Freire’s (1998) view of practice and theory as a dynamic, dialectical tension between doing and reflecting on doing. This tension, however, need not be as oppositional as depicted by Hegel’s theory in which thesis faces antithesis in a cyclical manner. Praxis in teacher inquiry may yield Fecho’s elegant dialoguing, or a dialectical union of reflection and action (Hoffman-Kipp, Artiles, & Lopez-Torres, 2003). When and how does teacher inquiry promote theory generation? Some argue that teachers’ actions are always and already theory-driven and that reflection on praxis always constitutes theorizing. Others offer more complex analyses. Examination of one experienced teacher researcher’s work illustrates the processes.

**How an Experienced Teacher Used Teacher Inquiry to Theorize and Transform Practice**

Through classroom inquiry in several U.S. locales, Gallas (2003) explored imagination and literacy. She began with a puzzling realization that a young student’s reading comprehension problems appeared rooted in inexperience with imaginative play. For several years, Gallas drew on ethnographic methods that included collecting and analyzing field notes and her own journal entries; audio- and videotaped (and often transcribed) classroom discourse and interviews with students; and children’s writings, drawings, and other artifacts of work and play. Supported by a community of the Brookline Teacher Research Seminar (BTRS, 2004), Gallas especially examined transcripts in ways informed by a BTRS tenet that students were making sense, and it was the teacher researcher’s job to understand what that sense was. Theoretical and empirical works shaped analyses and provided explanatory power: “Four approaches to literacy helped me clarify what I was seeing in my data” (Gallas, p. 62). For example, Gallas expanded her understanding of literacy acts to see them as parts of larger discourses and analyzed how discourse appropriation was intimately connected to children’s engagement and developing sense of literate identities. She noted patterns in how students used texts and literacy tools, when and how students became part of a story, how they engaged in storytelling and drama, and how they learned to interact with books in imaginative ways. She especially reviewed data for examples of how imagination and embodied engagement with texts supported comprehension.

Gallas (2003) tapped other sources in featuring fidelity not to “the literature” but to understanding the role of imagination in literacy development. These included literary authors, social and psychological thinkers, verifiable and retrievable sources from wildly disparate fields. Also, a bank of classroom experiences was a key knowledge source in reviewing data: “This exchange was one I had seen before with these young writers; it is most probably one that other teachers of young children have also witnessed” (Gallas, p. 46). In this way, the more experienced teacher as researcher abstracts across time, events, and cases. Finally, Gallas explicitly examined ways she drew on life experiences, especially developing imagination in childhood, as yet another source as she worked to develop and refine a theory of imagination and literacy. Her culminating work, documented in a final section of her book, is an instantiation of how she used her developing theory to guide new action—ways she and her students engaged in praxis where imagination gets explicitly treated as tightly interwoven with literacy development. Gallas’ work provides an exemplar for highlighting methods of teacher inquiry.

**Methods, Knowledge Production, and Theory in Teacher Inquiry**

**Finding Focus and Problem Framing** Because teacher inquiry often arises from puzzling students and events and from patterns in students’ performance, an important puzzle, challenge, or problem generally shapes the inquiry once focused and framed. ELA inquiries range in focus. They include curricular concerns such as documenting children’s growth in response to a curricular innovation. One such
example was a study that used coding of children’s story strategies to gauge cultural resources students brought to bear on narrative and how these evolved after curricular innovation in narrative writing (Heatley & Stronach, 2002). Inquiries include gender equity concerns such as diversifying writing genres primary students produce, and documenting impacts of such change on the writing and work habits of resistant boys (McPhail, 2009). Concerns of language and access play a role in inquiry conducted by Lew (1999) as she examined writing by a second language learner completed in 9th and 12th grades and interviewed the student about her perspectives on her writing, writing needs, and recommendations for teaching writing. Other classroom-based ELA inquiries respond to institutional concerns, such as Douillard’s (2003) account of how she critiqued and challenged a district writing assessment for K–6 students by developing and testing a revised instrument. Through construction of clearer prompts and a more detailed scoring guide to capture dimensions of writing, Douillard worked with colleagues to test her new assessment tools and provided evidence of how the revised prompt provided greater task focus for students and the scoring guide captured nuances of writing in the sample responses of two of her students. Published reports of inquiry, however, often belie the complex process of finding focus.

Problem-framing in teacher inquiry may be clear and sudden or may require longer term reflection. One first-grade teacher reported how she was aware that she and other teachers avoided exploring the events of 9/11, assuming the issues were too frightening and complex for young children to handle (Burns, 2009). However, after a student raised questions about 9/11, the problem frame was clear: It was time to take action, informed by literacy models, to enable students to read, respond to, and discuss themes of war in a month-long unit, and it was time to study students’ engagements with this innovation. Through analysis of students’ writing, drawings, and transcribed discussions, Burns distilled themes of students’ readiness to reflect on war, rehearse more peaceful stances, and learn to take actions in support of peace. Her new understandings from even a month-long unit offer teaching and learning principles to shape future actions for Burns and the readers of her report.

Fecho (2004) provides a book-length account of inquiry that likewise began in a surprising classroom event, but the problem framing evolved and expanded over time. As a White male teacher working with mostly African American youth in an urban school, Fecho was enthused to share with students Nikiki Giovanni’s poem “Beautiful Black Men.” However, students proclaimed resistance to what they felt was a stereotypical depiction and use of dialect and slang that “made fun of the way Black people talk” (Fecho, p. 13). The teacher’s “anticipated love-in for this lyric from the 1960s became, instead, a spontaneous protest” (p. 14). Fecho later engaged students in conducting their own inquiries into issues of language and power, which enabled students and teacher to learn much about these issues. The puzzling moment prompted the teacher’s reflection and action, but the larger inquiry unfolded over many years and through close looking at focal students and their work, yielding theory development about the role of inquiry in exploring race, language, identity, and power among adolescents.

As work unfolds over time, teacher researchers have some periods of systematic data collection and analysis and others when demands of practice trump systematicity of inquiry or when a particular inquiry issue recedes or gets recast. Fecho (2004) notes that for many experienced teacher researchers, inquiry is not conducted through bounded studies but rather through an ongoing attention to often related and developing foci. It is not a tidy formula:

We go into a meaning-making mode that includes past, current, and future discussions. We don’t perceive the problem, go to the literature, collect the data, analyze them, and implement new practice…. Rarely is there one moment of epiphany where our purpose and direction come suddenly clear. Instead, our process is marked by a series of small “ahas”… (p. 29)

A bank of professional experience, however, may be tapped by more veteran teachers and often supported by artifacts of instruction, even when data collection is not formally underway.

Data Collection in Teacher Inquiry Opportunities for data gathering are the teacher researcher’s affordances, accessed when adopting an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Classroom researchers coming from the outside must negotiate entry, build rapport and trust with participants, and hope that on classroom visit days, there will be adequate access to information as raw data. In contrast, teacher researchers enjoy privileged access to all forms of student work; immediate gathering of formal and informal student reflections; potentially longer term data collection that being there affords; and access to an emic perspective of student and classroom life through daily contact. These opportunities, however, yield rich data only for those teacher researchers who have methods and tools to gather relevant information and who manage to play ongoing dual roles of teacher and researcher. Student work samples and achievement data serve as primary data sources in much teacher inquiry. Field notes and classroom discourse data can be more difficult to collect for the practicing teacher. As already illustrated by the work of Gallas (2003), the BTRS (2004) nonetheless developed a culture of taping and transcribing discourse for seminar discussion and inquiry; such data figure heavily in the work of the group.

Analysis and Evidence in Teacher Inquiry When conducted with rigor, teacher inquiry yields practice-based evidence. This term flips the popular expression derived from policy and measurement that all teaching practice should be evidence-based. McNamara (2002) critiques how the phrase often means imported evidence, decontextualized
from real classrooms, arguing that evidence needs to derive from classroom practice. Such practice often is immediate and necessarily responsive for the professional, viewed as praxis when tapping a knowledge base of effective practice and/or prior inquiry. Methodological adaptations and new standards may be needed for this particular kind of ELA research; nonetheless, nothing is more crucial than providing illustrations and evidence to support claims (Mitchell, 2003).

In a review of 25 reports in a UK pilot project designed to enable educators to take charge of and participate in teacher research, Foster (1999) found value for teachers but also several major and many minor problems. Some of these relate to other forms of research but still warrant discussion. First, projects had only sketchy information on research design and methods, often unclear foci, omission of key constructs were defined, and especially little information on how qualitative data were analyzed. Second, amounts of data were extremely limited, often ambiguous, with qualitative data often decontextualized and unattributed, and cases presented without clarifying how they represented full samples. Third, lack of adequate evidence undermined claims and, in some cases, evidence lacked relevance to claims. Foster warned that a lack of critical scrutiny of teacher research projects can yield questionable claims that can, in turn, support questionable classroom practices. Zeichner (2009) echoed this concern, noting we need to beware of an uncritical glorification of teacher knowledge, as there is good and bad teacher research, just as with any kind.

The field of teacher inquiry can benefit from increasingly careful attention to data and evidence. Of particular importance is establishing trustworthiness and usefulness of the report, clarifying that it is more than mere story (McBride, 2003). This includes providing attention to what was done with artifacts to turn them into “data” that can be examined to assess claims. Some argue that all student work is data; more accurately, such work serves potentially as data. One set of analytic tools builds one set of understandings; selecting another leads to other findings (Erickson, 2004). M-CLASS teams, named for the group’s multi-city project focused on multicultural teaching and teacher research in urban schools in the 1990s, worried about this—that their biases or partial stories would uncover semi-truths (Freedman, Simons, Kalnin, Casareno, and The M-CLASS Teams, 1999). Certainly, the myth of objectivity in scientific research was challenged significantly in the mid-20th century. Nonetheless, as Erickson points out, one does not merely find data; one must construct both data and their analyses together.

Various analytic tools have been used effectively in teacher inquiry (including studies cited in this chapter), and resources describing their use are available for teachers. Analyses in teacher inquiry may be guided by ethnographic methods including considerations of classrooms as developing cultures and the use of multiple perspectives in analyzing experience (Frank, 1999). Discourse analysis processes and tools may include learning to frame and reframe conversations and learning to read conversations for power dynamics and for issues when clashes occur among students (and between students and teacher) related to race and other identity issues (Rex & Schiller, 2009). Rubrics of various kinds help to quantify degree of success in hitting achievement targets but need critical treatment of what they do and do not capture. Practice is helpful in coding larger patterns in student work that require repeated readings. A priori categories may play a role in examining certain features: quantity and fit of descriptive words in children’s narrative; attention to knowledge sources students use to make sense of literary text; ways students warrant evidence in analytic writing. To analyze more global features of student work and thinking, many ELA teachers are well positioned, as this involves thematic exploration, analytic moves many learned through the discipline of literary analysis. When we compare and contrast two poems or find a thread of ideas across novels, we do some textual analysis, close looking at language and resources to construct meaning. Such attention is necessary in teacher inquiry in ELA, a language-rich subject area. It also is necessary in any inquiry where classroom discourse, open-ended questionnaires, or interviews play a role, as these language-based data sources require close analysis of connections among language units.

Clearly, data displays and textual representations of evidence are keys to strengthening knowledge claims for both the teacher researcher her/himself and others. Several challenges and insights from the M-CLASS (Freedman et al., 1999) are salient. Challenges included gaining critical distance from one’s practice and the need to construct both teaching and research strands of a double narrative. Insights included research leaders guiding teams to be careful to use data and not memories for claims, and a team member reporting value in narratives but resisting gratuitous storytelling that did not address research questions.

Other Sources for Ideas and Explanatory Power Literature sources are vital for strong teacher inquiry. Teachers often resist academic research because it feels unrelated to K–12 classroom concerns, uses language inaccessible to K–12 teachers, and often positions teachers as the problem with education (Freedman et al., 1999; McNamara, 2002; Zeichner, 2009). Since inquiry foci often originate in classroom life, many who conduct teacher inquiry do not find it necessary to document where the problem comes from: “It arose in front of my eyes.” Also, because many conducting teacher inquiry hold the goal of feeding new insights right back into practice rather than sharing it in public forums, they find it unnecessary to situate the work in larger educational conversations as recorded and published. While such a position is compelling, it risks perpetuating a kind of solipsistic effort, in a vacuum, unaware of parallel efforts in other classrooms, other labs, trying to reinvent the wheel.

Many teacher inquiry reports include few if any references and often with a mere nod: “I agree with Authors 1, 2, and 3 that students need to write frequently in order to
develop.” Some miss the potential of linking their inquiry to readings for creative leaps in thinking and for transformation of understanding (Hubbard & Power, 1999). Situating context-specific details in larger literacy ideas and conversations helps to make a case matter to larger communities (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). In this way, the writer abstracts from particulars. This enables moving from reporting what happened to reflecting on what happens (Moffett, 1968). As noted earlier in the Gallas (2003) example, some longer term inquiries also provide new ways of thinking about kinds of knowledge sources and literatures to be tapped for teacher inquiry.

Cross-Case Analyses and Cumulative Knowledge in Teacher Inquiry Reports of cross-case analyses of teacher inquiry in ELA are rare, but their use can support the cumulative nature of knowledge production. Individual inquiries and case studies can promote theory-generation; however, cross-case analyses can add generalizations about teaching and learning phenomena. Two examples point to possibilities. Both include cross-case work on topical content and what was learned about it, as well as on the inquiry process itself. In one teacher education course, four preservice teachers managed systematic documentation and mostly quantitative analyses of varied approaches to journal writing they tested with elementary grade students (Radenecich, Eckhardt, Rasch, Uhr, & Pisaneschi, 1998). In addition to reporting specifics of the four cases, the authors report both content and process themes across cases to inform future inquiry, particularly in the context of demanding teacher education experiences and timelines. A set of ideas emerged as potential guides for future teaching and inquiry. The authors caution that they cannot generalize from four highly contextualized cases, but their work offers promise for future cross-case studies. A second example approaches a multicase study: a set of cases sharing foci but designed to enable variation in topic and context (Stake, 2006). Freedman et al. (1999) include 6 M-CLASS cases from several U.S. cities, as well as cross-case analyses of processes and products of the full set of 24. Analyses emerge as a clustering of cases by three themes; a chapter per book section on cross-case issues per theme; and a final chapter on discoveries from teaching and inquiry in urban schools.

Future multicase studies of teacher inquiry might identify cross-case choice points in advance, or a “quintain,” a common target or theme with, as Stake (2006) suggests, multiple related cases in varied contexts, elements that can support generalization across cases. Conducting multicase study may require a cultural shift and some professional retooling, but teacher inquiry and ELA research can benefit from such work to find ways to learn the uniquely situated nature of cases of phenomena but also commonalities that document trends and help build a professional knowledge base.

The Role of Research Colleagues Conducting teacher inquiry is challenging for various reasons, including lack of time, institutional support, and career incentives/rewards for doing it. Still, many teachers engage the work and commit to going public with it, particularly if supported by communities of like-minded teacher researchers. Support, according to Loughran (2003), requires three conditions: (a) share and make research a collaborative venture; (b) develop confidence so it is safe to reveal even unsuccessful inquiry outcomes; and (c) communicate findings so others will identify with them, making reports ring true. Groups that support teacher inquiry in ELA document such practices. Some develop mechanisms to tap models and mentors. M-CLASS teams benefitted from university-based staff providing resources, instruction, and feedback on projects, as well as inquiry models to promote discussion of genre features (Freedman et al., 1999). Experienced BTRS members modeled processes for colleagues newer to inquiry, including methods for taping, transcribing, and analyzing student talk (Ballenger & Rosebery, 2003).

Many other groups have supported teacher inquiry (e.g., National Writing Project sites and lesson study teams); one focuses inquiry on a teaching and policy link (Rust, 2009). More university-schools collaborations on inquiry may support development of the knowledge base for teaching. It is noteworthy that several highly accomplished long-term inquiries were conducted by current and former K–12 teachers who hold doctorates. Perhaps extended academic time to study and ruminate enabled production of such theory-generating work. This fact suggests a need for institutional arrangements of various kinds to sustain the work, deepen it, and strengthen it methodologically. Partnerships of schools and university offer possibilities to support these efforts, but many issues need to be considered for their success, including commitments to joint activity and mutual support, as well as grasping and critiquing ways in which contextual issues and pressures impact processes and outcomes (Stronach & McNamara, 2002).

Conclusion Developing as a movement, teacher inquiry took hold in recent decades (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Reports of professional development values for teachers from conducting such inquiry are plentiful. However, Zeichner (2009) notes how “few seriously treat the knowledge that teachers generate through their inquiries as educational knowledge to be analyzed and discussed” (p. 108). As a professional practice and knowledge generating activity, teacher inquiry invites such analysis and discussion. Continued attention to methods and reporting, and a commitment to analysis across cases, can result in teacher inquiry as increasingly conscious and informed praxis.

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Research as Praxis

References


