



Harold (Blaz) Brown

What Teachers Learn from "Kid Watching"

Teacher-researchers in a Colorado district are expanding their understanding of teaching and learning by viewing their classrooms as "thoughtful communities," where they, too, are learners.

RICHARD VANDEWEGHE

Recently I asked teachers participating in the Douglas County School District's Higher Literacy Project about their classroom-based research. One teacher talked excitedly about "an absolutely amazing event that happened just this morning." She then shared an anecdote about an at-risk 8th grader who wrote something longer than a sentence for the first time since September: a poem about his alienation from school. For this teacher-researcher, an unexpected event, like the poem suddenly and

awkwardly composed by a marginally literate child, made her ask questions: Why did he do that now? What let loose in him? Has he learned to trust me? The class?

Another teacher looked down at his feet, hands in pockets, and admitted that his project is "taking turns I didn't expect" and that "the more I listen — really listen — to how these kids talk about their reading in the history textbook, the more I think I need to know about reading!" For him, realizing that he knows little about the problems kids

have with reading history texts is seen as a professional opportunity rather than a shortcoming.

Another response came from a teacher who suddenly reached into her skirt pocket, pulled out a small notebook, flipped over pages of penciled notes, and read her observations of a class debate about a Hemingway short story. For her, getting some insight into the patterns of discourse in class debates is exciting.

These are typical responses of teacher-researchers who view their classrooms as places where they are the learners — learning from their students. As Mary W. Olson said recently, "These are confident teachers who research questions that intrigue and puzzle them, who seek answers and understanding about their students' learning and their own teaching, and who strive to be more knowledgeable in their responses to the teaching/learning cycle" (1990, p. 13).

Thoughtful Communities

Teacher research in Douglas County, Colorado, is sponsored by the district's Thoughtful Communities: The Douglas County Higher Literacy Project. Participants commit to

conducting two research projects in two years. They form "thoughtful communities" with other district teacher-researchers, who collaborate with and support one another in their research. At the same time, they seek to create thoughtful communities of learners in their classrooms: groups of students who collaborate with one another in constructing and refining their own knowledge. The second part of the program's title indicates its aim to promote and understand the nature of higher literacy, that complex of skills, attitudes, and abilities that mark the genuinely literate person of the 21st century (Brown 1988).

What makes this project distinctive is the individually designed programs of professional growth determined by the teacher-researchers themselves. To commit to doing research (in addition to all the other things that draw on their time and energy) constitutes a major investment in change. Then there is the large-scale district support for teachers-as-researchers: participating teachers receive release time for project research, university graduate credit, hourly pay for attending meetings, books to add to their professional libraries, and expenses paid for project-related professional conferences.

Project teachers meet regularly to discuss readings, issues and problems in higher literacy and classroom research; help one another (in writing workshops) to prepare project reports; and participate in institutes related to their professional development.

The Research Projects

By observing their students at work, asking good questions about learning, and, as Glenda Bissex says, seeing "everything that happens in a classroom . . . as data to be understood rather than causes for blaming or



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congratulating" (1986, p. 483). Thoughtful Communities teachers take on research projects that illuminate their understanding of teaching and learning, regardless of the projects' potential for success or failure. "We can learn from failures as well as successes, same as our kids," one teacher recently remarked. A sampling of their projects includes:

- investigation of ways to help students learn to write in visually articulate ways (using graphic, typographic, and spatial techniques);
- inquiry into the contradictions teachers face when they take time to promote higher literacy in their classrooms;
- development of a writing portfolio approach to outcomes-based assessment in social studies;
- exploration of the learning value of ambiguity and speculative thinking in language arts and social studies;
- development of classroom structures that address the needs of at-risk students.

The projects originate from a number of sources, and in each source

there exists some kind of tension. One source is *pedagogical experimentation*, where the tension is inherent in such speculation as "I wonder if this approach could work for me?" This was the case with one of our researchers, who came into the project intrigued by a teaching approach that encouraged active questions. He determined that he wanted to find out if, how, and why active questions contribute to higher literacy.

The second source of tension has to do with *self-reflection* and the corresponding doubt that gives rise to action. Like other reflective educators, project teachers engage in a "cycle of thought and action based on professional experience" (Wellington 1991, p. 4). For example, many teachers change completely their initial project area once they begin reading and talking with others about higher literacy. They say, in effect, "Why am I not promoting higher literacy in the way I teach?" The answers to that single question lead them to reflect on how they teach, how their kids learn, and how things could be.

Third, teachers *discover* projects through their research activities. They may tentatively commit to a project and in the course of reading about their topic, collecting classroom data, and reflecting on both, find their *real* project topic. They say, "Knowing *this* leads me to think in these ways now." This is what happened with a language arts teacher whose research topic began as an investigation of nonstandardized methods of assessing reading and writing. After seven months, her focus shifted to developing a learning environment in her classroom where assessment became integrated with, rather than separated from, her teaching.

Much professional growth occurs through trying to understand or resolve these tensions. Teachers discover that new techniques do or don't work for them — and because they are experimenting thoughtfully, they get insight into why or why not. That's much different from the teacher who tries and fails and never asks why. Similarly, teacher-researchers who doubt themselves or their approaches rely on their research to prove or disprove the legitimacy of their doubt. And those who think new thoughts reconceptualize their research because they know that doing so is a primary reason for such research to go on.

Classroom-research-as-professional-development becomes the impetus as well as the vehicle for change. I saw this idea brought out in one teacher's research report:

As an observer, I was able to examine "why" and "how" things happen as they do. For the first time ever I brought questions as well as answers to my classroom; questions that have helped me better evaluate not only my students but also myself. In a relatively short time I

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have made, and plan to continue making, significant changes in my classroom. My sense is that without a component of teacher-based research, change would be slow in coming (Groll 1990, p. 37).

Teachers Reflect on Their Growth

The best indications of professional development in this project come from the teacher-researchers themselves, as they've contemplated their experiences in Thoughtful Communities. Here are just a few examples.

One teacher described how conducting classroom research altered the way she viewed herself:

I experienced many successes and frustrations along with some startling perceptions of myself as a teacher. . . . My successes include being a part of a happier, more exciting classroom experience with a minimum of "policewoman" responsibilities and the realization that it's okay not to be the ultimate expert in the eyes of my students.

Another teacher, whose project focused on the art of questioning, ended up with a rich and vastly expanded understanding of the heart of classroom inquiry:

Questions are not only a way of gaining knowledge — questions and knowledge fission to generate more questions and more knowledge. Questioning isn't a method or a technique; it has to be a habit — a lifestyle — if it is to lead students to higher levels of literacy.

Finally, a teacher whose research changed his view of school writing from "writing to present ideas" to "writing to learn" found that in addition to promoting a view of writing-as-a-way-of-learning, he needed to promote talking-as-a-way-of-learning:

I need to develop a skill in questioning that allows students to think. In the past, I usually orchestrated the discussion to get the answers I wanted to hear.

Insight into Professional Development

What does teacher research of the kind described here teach us about professional development? First, *true* professional growth accompanies a skeptical stance toward oneself and toward one's classroom; it's a form of critical curiosity that many nonresearchers find hard to fathom.

Second, a collaborative network of teachers engaged in similar growth nourish and sustain one another in vital ways, especially during times of great challenge or doubt.

Third, collecting data — for example, observing and listening to kids, taking notes, reading learning logs and writing samples — forces teachers into the practice of monitoring learning in ways that demand reflection. That is, if things aren't going as one expects, one must ask why. Also, a wonderful sense of empowerment accrues to teachers who have a database for their teaching, who can say (with great

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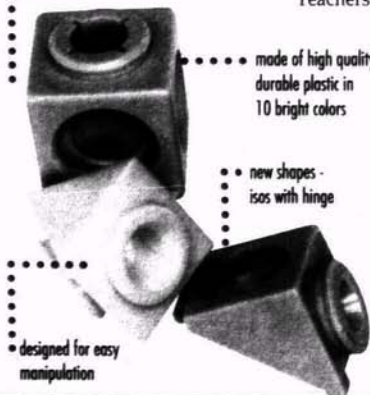
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gusto), "I know this works; here, let me show you these few hundred writing samples to illustrate what I mean."

Finally, teacher-researchers challenge systems (curriculum, assessment, for example). But they do so from affective and cognitive knowledge based on firsthand observation, wide reading, and deep conviction.

Teacher-researchers constantly probe and question, listen and observe, notice and note — to them, professional development is driven by the vision, knowledge, and ambition generated by their research. They are, in Yetta Goodman's words, "kid watchers" (1989, p. 8), teachers who interact with students and who monitor class activities in order to understand more about teaching and learning, mostly learning. □

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