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Finding and Framing Teacher Research Questions: Moving from Reflective Practice to Teacher Research

Jessica Singer

The author describes using a teaching journal as a tool to begin informal inquiry and research about her teaching. Changes in the author's teaching practices occurred as a result of reflection on her daily writing about student assignments, conversations, and observations. Over time, participating in reflective practices changed the way the author understood her role as an educator and instilled her with a sense of agency to begin working toward positive change within and beyond her classroom.

Starting With a Teaching Journal

As a beginning high school teacher in Portland, Oregon, balancing oversized classes, diverse student needs, meetings, and new curriculum, I often felt overwhelmed and scared. To help myself cope with this wonderful, yet stressful, work I found support by connecting with other teachers, reading instructional texts, and seeking ways of improving my practice. Before entering the teaching profession, I received my master's in education at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon, where I spent a year immersed in readings, assignments, and conversations about the value of teacher research. I was exposed to the idea that teacher research and, more specifically, written reflection could help to position new and experienced teachers in a role of inquiry.

When I completed this program and began teaching, I drew from the resources and practices from this teacher education training. I had read Atwell's (1987) *In the Middle* and was inspired by her careful book-length study of her own written inquiry about reading and writing

workshops with adolescents. I was invigorated by a presentation at the fall National Council for Teachers of English conference, where Gallas (1997) shared her research from her primary classes in New Mexico and read excerpts from her teaching journal. Ruth Shagoury (formerly Ruth Shagoury Hubbard), my advisor at Lewis & Clark College in the teacher education program and a co-author of *The Art of Classroom Inquiry: A Handbook for Teacher Researchers* (2003), taught a teacher research course as a part of the credential program where she shared methods for classroom research. I visited the classrooms of educators I admired greatly, such as Linda Christensen (2000) and Bill Bigelow (2002), where I witnessed curriculum and teaching devoted to social justice and written inquiry.

Even after surrounding myself with these models of rigorous teaching and research, I was left wondering how to transfer these ideas and practices to my own work as a new teacher. How could I add one more thing to my list of commitments and concerns? Although I had reservations, I wanted to find a way to begin to understand and examine more clearly what was taking place each day in my classroom. My goal was to become more conscious of what was happening in my teaching in order to improve my practice. The decision to begin writing daily in a teaching journal felt like a manageable step toward participating in a written inquiry process.

Reflective Teaching Journals

In the past twenty years, journals have been incorporated into instruction in schools as well as implemented as tools for inquiry in classrooms. Proff (1977) started the Dialogue House, an international journal-writing center, where he created workshops on writing a multidimensional diary. This early work helped familiarize people with the benefits of daily writing. The National Writing Project (www.writingproject.org) has also influenced daily writing and teacher inquiry practices through summer institute and inservice programs throughout the country. For example, as part of the South Coast Writing Project at the University of California Santa Barbara, teachers keep a journal the month before the institute begins and are then given time each morning during the month-long workshop to write in their journals.

Dudley (1996), a National Writing Project fellow in the San Joaquin Valley Writing Project, wrote about her use of a teaching journal in her article, "The Perils and Pleasures of Teacher Research: Excerpts from a Journal I Never Kept." She explains, "Keeping a classroom journal made me feel like a writer." Fulwiler's (1987) *The Journal Book* is a comprehensive anthology which examines journal writing as a form of learning. This collection serves to inform educators of the multiple uses of this kind of reflective writing and thinking. Although reflective written expression has become a significant component in teacher research and teacher preparation (see Darling-Hammond, 1994; Hillocks, 1999; Lieberman & Miller, 1999; Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1990; Paris, 1993), the whole notion of teachers as active thinkers and agents of change in schools is still fairly new.

Finding Time to Write

Blau (2003), author of the *Literature Workshop* and director of the South Coast Writing project, explains how teaching expertise develops through reflectivity and takes place on a continuum. He states, "The beginning teacher focuses on his or her teaching. The competent teacher begins to reflect on the connections between teaching and learning, and begins to find ways to use the professional knowledge base. Finally, the expert teacher is a reflective and analytical inquirer searching for ways to help students and colleagues make connections" (personal communication, April 2004). Taking time to write down my impressions of my teaching practice was a first step in transforming my work as an educator. As time allowed, I started taking notes throughout each school day and I found myself regularly writing in class with students. In my journal, I included ideas for upcoming lessons and questions I had concerning particular students. I approached student papers, conversations, notes, and absences as data that could inform me about my teaching and school culture. When lessons went well, I asked myself what worked so I could use successful strategies again. When I came across road bumps in my teaching or with colleagues, I formed questions in my teaching journal to work toward change. This informal written inquiry process opened up opportunities for me to make changes in my teaching based on what I had learned through

notes, assignments, conversations, and observations. I used my teaching journal as a way to inform my practice and interpret the academic and social feedback I received daily from students. My questions and writing provided me with a meta-awareness about my teaching and helped diminish previous feelings of barely keeping my head above water in the rush and chaos of the school year. Over time, these written reflective practices changed the way I understood my work as a teacher. Rather than feeling like what happened in my teaching with students and colleagues was a hit or miss game of chance, I began to see through notes in my journal how certain behaviors, successes, and failures were all a direct result of real and repeatable actions. Writing daily allowed me to step back and reflect on my work from a new perspective and it gave me a way to think about future teaching choices based on real data.

Stafford (1996) writes in *Quilting Your Little Solitudes* about finding ways to write a book one step at a time. His advice to writers applies to teacher researchers writing in their classrooms and schools. “The writer’s prerogative is to take small things seriously: A glimpse, a flicker of recollection, an evocative phrase of a few syllables spoken by someone near you. Take down observations and ideas in the moment they arrive” (p. 6). I filled my journal with pages of unpolished thoughts, questions, reactions to conversations, and wonderings. All of this writing was rough. Some days, I wrote lists and other days I wrote long reflections in response to a class or a conversation. I wrote along with my students during writing and reading workshops, and I often shared my writing when we met in small peer feedback groups. Students began to see me as a writer and came to expect that I would grab my journal in the middle of heated conversations in order to jot down ideas or quotes from their discussions. One morning, I was delighted when Emma walked into class with a smile. “Look, Ms. Singer, I have a journal too.”

I wrote notes to myself in brief spurts of rare silence before and after class or after school. I brought my teaching journal to department meetings to take note of conversations and decisions. During the first writing workshop with my ninth grade class in September, I wrote the following in my journal: *I can't believe how thirsty I am. I am getting better at this schedule little by little. I know it takes time to get started—to think of a place to go on the page—but then you just*

dive in. Ryan is biting his fingernails. Isaac is flipping his hat. Brandon's eyes are closing. Anna is tapping her pen—here it goes—Ryan is reading something he just wrote. Things aren't spontaneous. Brandon started and here goes Isaac. Now Ryan is writing furiously. I wonder what he has to say? (Teaching Journal, 1999). I glued the following note onto a page in my teaching journal from Jenny, a ninth grader, who left me her revision plans for a narrative in progress: *"I am going to talk to my mom and finish my conclusion for my story. I think I am going to write a poignant conclusion and maybe even a little bit of a circular ending. Not sure. Thanks, this lesson helped."* (personal communication, September 22, 1999). I took note of the things in my teaching that interested me.

Finding time to write proved easier than I originally believed was possible. I engaged in the ongoing process of interpreting what I was experiencing and witnessing as an educator. Peshkin (2000) describes the importance of collecting information as a qualitative researcher and how this process leads to a starting point. "I have been engaged in the process of interpretation from the very beginning of my research process. I do so in order to create my starting point, a conception of what my inquiry will be about" (p. 9). Wilhelm (2002), author of *Reading Don't Fix no Chevys*, explains how his research often stems from questions he keeps track of in his teaching journal. His advice to teachers interested in beginning an inquiry process is to write down things that make you think, things that bug you, observations. My teaching journal became a place to notice ideas, questions, threads, or patterns in my work.

From Reflective Practice to Teacher Research

Making changes in my teaching and at my school meant taking a step beyond written reflection. I filled pages of journals, noticing "hot" and "cold" spots in my teaching (Peshkin, 2000), and I documented important discoveries; however, this alone did not lead to any direct action or change in my classroom or school. The way I moved beyond reflection was through the creation of research questions. In order to form questions about my teaching life, I looked for patterns in my journals, thinking, and notes and began to find reoccurring threads

guiding my thinking and writing. Gallas (1997) uses the image of a beachcomber to describe her data collection process as teacher researcher. “At first, taken with the texture, color, and shape of sea glass, the novice beachcomber picks up every piece ... Later, blue glass becomes the prize because it is so rare, and in the process of looking for the blue glass the beachcomber’s focus narrows. As it does, the beachcomber begins to notice subtleties of color and shape” (p. 10).

I began to see patterns in my journal entries. My informal questions often focused on individual students and reoccurring issues in the classroom. Many of my questions arose out of frustration or tensions in my teaching: *I wonder about Maya. Why does she hate to read? Why are my seniors so quick to categorize people? What do these labels mean to my students? Why does Jeremy stare off in space during reading workshop? How can I help him?* Other questions came from conversations with colleagues in department meetings. During an English department meeting in another English teacher’s classroom, I copied assignments and directions my colleague had written on the board: *HONORS: Finish and revise narrative. REGULARS: Begin narrative in class.* I wondered why expectations for students were so different depending on whether or not they were in an “Honors” or “Regular” class. I wrote, *“What messages do we send students in the ways we sort and categorize them?”*

My work with other educators reinforced my questioning and gave me a forum to discuss ideas. I became involved with Rethinking Schools (www.rethinkingschools.org), a progressive education group in Portland, Oregon, and worked on their steering committee to plan gatherings for teachers in the district to come together and have conversations about school reform. Working with parents, professors, activists, and educators provided support, conversation, and models of other people working to think critically and deeply about systems of education. Bill Bigelow (2002), a member of the Portland Area Rethinking Schools, shares his advice to new teachers, “Don’t be a Lone Ranger. Teaching can be isolating if you let it. Establish a support group, a study group, a critical friends group, or an action group—whatever you want to call it. Just because you are in a classroom all alone with your students doesn’t mean you should reproduce that isolation outside of your classroom. ... And finally, keep a journal. Figure out a way to distance yourself from the pain. Find a way to pull

back from that, to be able to think critically about it and not be swallowed by emotion” (pp. 13-14). I did not want to be “in a classroom alone with my students.” I invited Ruth Shagoury to visit my classroom once a week to help me create questions and notice patterns in my teaching and practice. I found that this kind of ongoing dialogue with other educators and researchers not only made teaching less lonely, but it also helped my work become more deliberate, collaborative, and responsive to students’ needs.

Wondering About Students

“*Why isn’t Maya reading during reading workshop? What books would Maya love?*” Working with Maya in 5th period English after lunch was challenging. She refused to read and rejected any books I offered. Her lack of progress bothered me and I wanted to learn more. I noticed in my teaching journal that my entries were full of frustration about Maya. Recognizing this recurring theme helped me begin to unearth questions and strategies to begin connecting with this struggling student. I decided to interview Maya during class one day about her hobbies, family, and interests. I noticed that she wore a T-shirt with a Native American symbol in its center. She told me that she was Native American and that she loved basketball. As days passed, I continued to sit with Maya and share conversations. I took note in my journal of details, such as her love for drawing cartoons and the fact that her family lived in an apartment far from school. As I became more familiar with Maya, I offered her books I had collected with her interests in mind. Finally, after several weeks, she accepted a recommendation and started to read Sherman Alexie’s (1993) *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. She began reading the first few chapters of this book and then lost interest. So I handed her April Sinclair’s (1995) *Coffee Will Make You Black*. Not only did Maya read this book on her own from start to finish, but she also read the text aloud to her friends in her free time. I often saw Maya during school breaks sitting at the bus stop across the street munching on food and reading aloud while her group of friends stood alongside her listening. Questions about how to connect Maya to books that mattered to her pushed me to think about larger literacy questions:

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- What platforms must be present in a classroom reading program to create a safe space for readers with varying interests and ability levels?
 - How can I connect students with books that will spark their imagination?

Reflecting about Maya's refusal to read led me to think of alternative ways of connecting with her. This is an example of how written reflection about a particular student helped me try a new technique in my teaching. Previously, I had not interviewed students about their reading interests or habits. After working with Maya, I realized how important this kind of inventory and information is in understanding my student's literacy interests and needs. My writing in my teaching journal is not always neat and tidy; it come out messy and stems from my daily life as a teacher.

Ruth Shagoury and Andie Cunningham participate in research together in Cunningham's kindergarten class in a suburb of Portland, Oregon (Cunningham & Shagoury, 2005). Shagoury wrote about this current research in a recent correspondence, "[We] have been sorting out the wonders of such a diverse community this year in her kindergarten. We have several non-English speakers from Mexico, Romania, and the Ukraine; a little girl whose first language and heritage is Lakota; and many working-class students. None of the students in this class have had a preschool experience before kindergarten. They are an amazing group. Right now we are looking at how they are forming a community. We were rambling last week about the question, "How do kindergarteners define communal knowing?" (personal communication, November, 2002). Through conversations, teaching, observing, and field notes, questions about classrooms emerge. Shagoury and Cunningham used these questions to help them implement new and creative reading and writing workshop strategies with their students. This written inquiry process led to wonderful discoveries about the depth and complexity of kindergarten learning (for more information about this research see Cunningham & Shagoury, 2005).

Finding Questions Between Two Points

Hubbard and Power (2003) write, “Often, the best research questions are located in a taut spot between two points. We sometimes walk a tightrope between who we are as teachers and learners and who we want to be. Once you find a gap that needs to be traversed—between what you think will be learned in a math lesson and what is learned, between your love of a book and your students’ distaste for the same text, you have found territory in your classroom that is ripe for questioning” (p. 25). I began to ask questions in my teaching journal about the system of tracking “Honors” and “Regular” students within my English department. This sorting system seemed to perpetuate divisions and class distinctions within the school community. I formed questions in my writing about the culture of the school. I was drawn to the question of whom my school honored.

As I walked to my classroom each morning, I looked at the school with the eyes of an anthropologist gathering data. I began to notice through my written inquiry process that my regular students were not given a place in my school. Their faces were not photographed and displayed publicly as members of student government, their names were not in the entryway’s honor roll, they were not members of the yearbook staff or the newspaper. As a new teacher, my written inquiry helped demystify my students, school, and teaching. Slowly, this written reflection led to action. I started conversations with my department and administration about the inequity in our tracking system. Eventually, these conversations led to the two-year political process of untracking our school’s freshman English program. The department worked to untrack the freshman course offerings so that students would not begin their high school careers sorted by predetermined ability groupings (Singer, 2004). The department became committed to providing students with a rigorous and equitable start to their high school studies. Through the experience of transforming my written reflection into action, I learned that simple questions could lead to profound change and a sense of agency.

Creating Questions Around Curriculum

The following year, in my freshman English class, I was drawn to the reoccurring comments, discussions, and informal actions of my students who showed frustration and anger about not having a voice that felt heard outside of the classroom walls, the school, and in their larger communities. I started writing in my journal small vignettes of verbal exchanges of students feeling disconnected from learning and school. I became aware of this recurring theme in my teaching journal and wanted to do something to address this issue. I decided to create curriculum to provide students with opportunities to not only feel heard amongst their peers and in the community, but to use their voices to work toward creating positive social change.

Over the course of a year, I created curriculum devoted to the study of social activism. My written inquiry process helped give me courage to try new curriculum. Throughout this activism curriculum, I created questions in my teaching journal to help guide me in the study of my first and second period freshman English classes.

- How do students define social activism?
- What strategies for literacy instruction help students from different backgrounds expand their reading and writing abilities?

In my teaching journal, I continued to collect student work, reflections, art, and excerpts from conversations during the ongoing study of activism. I noticed how students began to take ownership of their work when I gave them opportunities to explore their own interests and passions. My teacher research helped me become more open to students' convictions and I also learned that the way to take a long journey with students into a new area of study is by taking a number of smaller, manageable steps.

There will never be a day when I can say, "I know everything there is to know as an educator." When I slow down to record the voices, sounds, questions, and details of my days, I notice ways to shift my thinking and planning. It is easy for me to walk into my classroom each day and close the door for six hours. Through a process of questioning, examining, and revisiting ongoing challenges, I became

a more thoughtful and deliberate teacher and my teaching became more responsive to the learning needs of individual students in my classes. Seemingly small conversations, notes, passing gestures, and posters on classroom walls were data in my quest to learn more about my teaching, students, and school. This process allowed me to see the systems of school not as permanent or set in stone, but as patterns of behavior that could be questioned, revisited, and modified. My process of interrogating my teaching spilled over to become a process of interrogating the context for my practice and the culture in which my practice was shaped. This helped me to see more clearly the system I worked in and possibilities for changing it.

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