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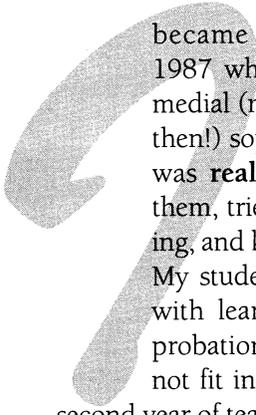


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What Would Happen If . . . ? A Teacher's Journey with Teacher Research

Susan Abbott



became a teacher-researcher in 1987 when I was teaching my remedial (no heterogeneous grouping then!) sophomores basic English. It was **really** basic. I read aloud to them, tried to involve them in writing, and keep myself physically safe. My students were angry kids, kids with learning disabilities, kids on probation, and kids who just did not fit in anywhere else. It was my second year of teaching, and I was drowning in despair.

Through my local writing project I entered into a course of study entitled *Teacher Research*. I really needed the six units they offered although I felt trepidation at the word *research*. I always hated searching library shelves for old journals to find information. The flier said this class would be different, that research meant examining something closely, and that this time we would examine what we knew, our classrooms.

I had felt like such a failure as a teacher that year; my kids scared me professionally as I believed that they would never learn to read and write well enough to pass our proficiency test, and then I would be fired. I also feared for my sanity. My students' taunts and anger frightened me more than I liked to admit. Although part of me knew that I would have nothing original or enlightening to say in my research, I was reassured by the idea that nothing occurring in the classroom is a failure, only an interesting piece of data. These were rules I knew I could live with, and so I began. Our leader asked us to take a second look at ourselves, our students, and our curricula and ask the question, "What would happen if?" I began to question my practice by asking: What would happen if I changed how I presented the material? If, for example, I used less auditory styles and more kinesthetic, would my kids do better?

That year I recorded almost daily my frustrations and my fears in my research log. Occasionally I would report on a lesson that seemed to break through and bring out some success.

We met as a teacher research group every other week. I would read aloud some of my log with a smaller group of three other teachers, and they began to help me pull out of my log classroom successes, even when I could not see them. We would share food and discuss published research by focusing on what truths we as new teacher-researchers could glean for ourselves and our classrooms. I was discovering my much needed professional community.

Before beginning as a teacher-researcher, I did not even know that I needed a professional community. For me, the value of teacher research was the knowledge that practioners conduct research each and every day, just in different ways from traditional university researchers. The idea of independent university research that took into account little of the context of the relationships between the teacher and the learners, their parents, and school administrators became more and more ludicrous in my eyes. Instead of looking to outside researchers to define the questions of my practice and find solutions for me, teacher research allowed me to bring my classroom and all its variables to the research and from there judge the authenticity and usefulness of what is set forth as academic truth.

Teacher research has been my professional community for over six years now. It is a chance for me to meet teachers teaching across grade levels, from many school districts, and with hundreds of miles between our classrooms. It is a place where I can redefine myself as a teacher year after year. I would get excited by a concept and immediately ask, "What would happen if . . . ?," and suddenly I was onto a new project and a new

A teacher uses research in her classroom to study writing, literature, her students—and herself.

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theme for learning that year. It is the process through which I have found a way to study what I care desperately about: the students in my classroom.

TEACHER RESEARCH ON WRITING

My first year in teacher research my colleagues encouraged me to build on some successful writing processes they saw in my log, and I eventually began teaching interpretive writing in a new way. I used to just talk to the students about their writing, but I rarely let them talk to each other. This time I asked the students to talk out their writing ideas in small groups using tape recorders so that their ideas could not be lost. I extended the pre-composing time by days to let the kids think about the themes much more than they would normally. For the first time even my students who hated writing wrote at length an interpretive essay. I was amazed and inspired by their success, and I have never taught writing without extensive pre-composing time since. This led to the final paper I wrote about the struggles I had faced and the success I found when I tried to find the answer to what could happen if . . . ?

I had found the key to my growth as a teacher. I was excited about doing a study that second year. I was still teaching basic English, and I was bothered by the fact that over the course of the year, I'd lose half of my students to the district's alternative high school. I tracked four students by going to their new school and interviewing them and their teachers. I found that I suffered from some of the same prejudices that the students had about how easy it would be to make up credits and how loose the academic standards must be at their new school. I found out how well my students were doing. They had learned to work, to set goals, and most of all to respect themselves as people who could learn with the help of their new teachers and new expectations. I am now a strong advocate of this kind of alternative path. Teacher research took me to that understanding.

TEACHER RESEARCH ON MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE

I have studied the effect of aggressively including multicultural works and authors in my curriculum when my school population is eighty percent Anglo. I found that my students had strong feelings about any liter-

ary work that depicted a race other than their own. They told me they were tired of reading how bad everyone, but them, had it in America. They felt talking about race and racial issues only worsened campus tensions about race. I had students write to me publicly and privately on this issue.

My final paper, based on two years of data collection and my own reflections on what it meant for me and my students, earned me a lot of attention at my school's district office. Our administrators also saw the need and difficulty of addressing these issues and used some of my data to set new policy in this area.

A CASE STUDY

My latest teacher research involved following a student I happened to have for both his sophomore and junior years. It was a case study that consumed me because this time my research touched my heart. Joey was smart, but more street smart than school smart, unfortunately. He drank to forget his parents and to give himself the courage to ride bulls on the weekends. He, too, needed a community, and rodeo riding provided that for Joey. He had fallen victim to a gang beating early in his junior year, and I spent a great deal of time and effort trying to get him back on track academically. Although I did what I always do when I write a research study, I kept copies of his work (what work I could get him to do), copies of notes he sent me, and of notes that the administration sent me about him. I found that I needed very little of the traditional tools of a researcher. Instead I described watching him slip out of my protective grasp and how badly it all made me feel when June came, and I had no idea where he was.

TEACHER RESEARCH AS VALIDATION

Finally, teacher research is a validation of all that is right about teachers' stories. The sharing of qualitative information gathered through our own personal experiences is what makes teacher research valuable. Only those of us teaching in the midst of students, parents, and administrators can write teacher research. Everyone needs a community for teacher research where the work that you do is always personally and professionally compelling. My teacher research that used to be "This is how my successful lesson

worked for me” became a very personal inquiry into what are the boundaries between a teacher and a student, and it continues to evolve. Each year my teacher research involves more risk-taking as I explore what I do as a teacher and how well and sometimes how poorly I handle things in my classroom.

Finally, teacher research with its group meetings and peer support offer me a place to discuss what troubles me and excites me about our profession. I leave there renewed by the possibilities for positive change for myself, my students, and our peers.

Susan Abbott teaches at Elk Grove High School in California.

Vantage Point

Linda E. Opyr

*It's a crazy old junkyard.
The debris of abandoned dreams
lies strewn where grass once grew
and hearts are heaped
to rust in the rain,
victims whose vital signs
say only hit and run.
Barbed wire forbids both
exit and entry
and the junkyard dog sneers
in all directions.*

*But the moon works its magic
even this scrapheap
in shadow appears
architecturally sound,
a skyscraper
whose stories
seem strangely silent.
So slip your hand in mine.
We'll steal through starlight and spy together—
I've seen weeds
that will their way to the sun.*

Linda E. Opyr teaches at Floral Park Memorial High School in New York and has served as a teaching assistant at the New England Young Writers' Conference.