

The Student Teacher/Cooperating Teacher Collaborative Study: A New Source of Knowledge

Peter Smagorinsky and Ann Jordahl

In recent years educators at all levels have stressed the importance of classroom teachers' becoming more involved with research. Myers (1985) has suggested that teachers adopt procedures from published studies to conduct classroom inquiry, beginning by replicating the research of university scholars. University professors such as Donald Graves have sought to collaborate with the teachers whose students they observe, the investigations serving not only to produce data for analysis but to help teachers rethink their teaching. Others stress the need for classroom teachers to undertake their own research independent of university influence, using such practices as keeping journals (i.e., Strieb, 1985) of their classroom experiences to help provide ideas for inquiry into more effective teaching.

The push for classroom teachers to undertake research is motivated by the needs to bring the worlds of practitioners and researchers closer together, to encourage practitioners to investigate the effects of their instruction, and to give practitioner knowledge greater authority. Ultimately, we assume, teachers who conduct research will learn more about their own teaching, share their knowledge with other teachers, and be more receptive to the findings of other researchers.

The study of teaching by teachers should improve teaching; we assume that teachers who conduct inquiries—whether formal or informal—into the effects of their instruction will grow as professionals. Most suggestions for conducting classroom research are aimed at established teachers. Here we posit that learning the benefits of research during student teaching can give aspiring practitioners an opportunity to appreciate the fruits of classroom investigation and gain knowledge of research methods at a time when they are receptive to new ideas. Were teachers to learn methods for classroom inquiry during their professional orientation they could develop attitudes and habits that could foster growth throughout their careers. Rather than have this investigation supervised solely by a university authority, we propose

that the study be undertaken as a collaborative venture between a student teacher and cooperating teacher. We feel that such an experience will provide for a close and productive working relationship from which both novice and mentor can learn a great deal about teaching, learning, and research.

We base this proposal on our experience during Ann's student teaching while working on her M.A.T. For her master's thesis she had the option of conducting a study of some facet of her teaching. Our mutual interest in classroom research led us to collaborate on the design, execution and analysis of a study of her students' writing. In our case certain serendipitous conditions facilitated the execution of our project. At the time of our association we were both students at the University of Chicago. Most student and cooperating teachers do not enjoy such similar training; undertaking a collaboration such as this would require some effort to establish a proper rapport. The mutual analysis of a classroom process, however, could serve as a vehicle for two teachers, their differences in background and experience notwithstanding, to discuss the knowledge they bring to the job and use it to investigate a problem.

Ann suggested our research topic when she detected a weakness in our American Literature students' ability to support generalizations with concrete examples. We decided to focus on improving generalization and support during Ann's student teaching, and since we taught two American Literature sections we saw an opportunity to structure a study to contrast the effects of different instructional modes—teacher-led discussion and small group analysis—on improving this skill. The focus for our study emerged from several discussions concerning the characteristics of our students, the constraints of our curriculum and our instructional goals.

The impetus for collaborative research should come from the mutual concerns of the two researchers. Planning the study, then, can provide an opportunity for meaningful discussion about problems related to teaching and learning. The suggestion of research methods could come from the Teacher-Researcher section of the *English Journal*, Stephen North's *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*, publications on teacher-researchers, the researchers' knowledge of procedures from familiarity with scholarly journals, or recommendations from the student teacher's university advisor.

Our experience in conducting our study was beneficial for both of us and leads us to recommend such collaborations as an integral part of student teaching. Ann learned habits of self-reflection and analysis of teaching that should become a permanent part of her ability to

evaluate the effects of her teaching. We expect that learning these habits during her initiation will produce career-long benefits. The study benefitted Peter as well, helping him rediscover the importance of careful analysis of instruction through the responsibilities of observer and evaluator. By conducting this study we accomplished a variety of goals:

1. *We gained fundamental knowledge of classroom processes that should improve our teaching.* In contrasting teacher-led discussions with small group study we found that students who make few contributions in teacher-led discussions are greatly engaged in small-group discussions of related topics. One student who did not participate in any of three teacher-led discussions made 95 on-task comments in a 20 minute small group discussion (Jordahl, in progress). While this was a more dramatic change than most students experienced, her behavior illustrated the type of difference that classroom arrangement can make. In that we share a goal of increasing student involvement in classroom attention (a factor that greatly increases academic performance; see Bloom, 1954 and Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984), this knowledge should have a profound effect on the way in which we structure response opportunities in the future. The results of the study, then, can inform instructional practice.

2. *The cooperating teacher had a formal role in classroom observation to provide data for discussion of the student teacher's behavior and effectiveness.* We are all too familiar with the experience of cooperating teachers having little contact with student teachers following the infamous kiss at the classroom door. Our collaborative study provided a clear role for the cooperating teacher in observing classes and examining classroom processes. Thus Peter's role during the time that Ann was teaching included observing all classes and recording the number of contributions made by the teacher and each student during teacher-led discussions, and by each student in randomly selected small groups. The data from these observations were helpful in two areas. First, they provided important data for the study, measuring the frequency of student participation in teacher-led discussion and small group discussions, a factor that we anticipated would predict differences in pretest-posttest improvement. The data from these observations were also useful in discussing Ann's perceptions of her role as discussion leader, helping us to consider such problems as the frequency of her own comments and the effects of her remarks on students' willingness to take risks, think independently, and participate in discussions.

3. *The collaboration between cooperating teacher and student teacher allowed us to act as peers rather than as mentor and student.* The

collaborative nature of the project required mutual participation in planning the study and analyzing the data. We spent many hours together discussing the materials we thought would best suit our purposes, thinking how the sequence of materials and activities would best provide the contrasts we were looking for, and interpreting the results. This cooperative approach affected our working relationship beyond the bounds of the study; in that we had abandoned the notion of ourselves as master and apprentice, we tended to work as peers in evaluating Ann's teaching once the study was over. Indeed, our working relation became such that we began to regard her student teaching experience as a grand experiment and felt comfortable discussing problems with her teaching in terms of what we could learn from them.

4. *Both cooperating teacher and student teacher developed a medium through which to explore their own questions about the effectiveness of different instructional practices.* Our research method gave us a procedure for evaluating our instruction. We tend to be empirical sorts and so felt comfortable with a comparative study. Although we could not play the roles of both teacher and observer while working on our own, we could still apply some procedures from the research to future self-study: teach two classes with different methods to contrast their effects; examine carefully the relationship between instruction and evaluation to analyze their quality and appropriateness; engage as many students as possible in discussions to encourage their attention; and attend to the differences in student participation when arranged in different formats and involved in different activities.

Other forms of inquiry could provide useful procedures for subsequent application. Teachers who keep journals to reflect on instruction and learning could continue this practice; teachers who conduct case studies could continue to be particularly attentive to the progress of certain students. The intensive awareness one develops through the careful study of a phenomenon should leave a lasting impression on the investigator, particularly if the experience has been rewarding.

5. *Both cooperating teacher and student teacher gained experience in research design that they could apply to future inquiries.* Our study did not replicate the finding of similar investigations (Hillocks, 1986). The gains of the students working in small groups mode were disappointingly small and we needed to examine the reasons for this. Why would such greater engagement produce such slim gains? We determined two main reasons for the problem. The first was that the difficulty of the texts overwhelmed the power of the instructional modes. The stories we used in the instruction proved rather difficult for the students and thus did not serve as good vehicles for contrasting instructional modes

due to the comprehension problems they caused. Thus, our failure in this area taught us about the importance of piloting and the effects of the relative difficulty of materials in measurement.

The second reason was that instruction did not sufficiently teach the skill of generalization and support. We determined that additional lessons were necessary to teach students to generalize from evidence. Our study helped us analyze the instruction and its effects and identify problems in the sequence of lessons.

6. *Both cooperating teacher and student teacher were able to test findings from university researchers in their own classrooms under "realistic" conditions.* At the time of our collaboration we were both students of George Hillocks, Jr., at the University of Chicago, Ann in the M.A.T. program and Peter in the doctoral program. Our interests and research naturally tended to follow patterns in Hillocks' work. Our area of his research concerns instructional *modes*; that is, the arrangement of and interactions between students and teachers. His research (1986) points to the effectiveness of an *environmental* mode (including small group work) when compared to a *presentational* mode (featuring the teacher as the center of all interaction). Our project allowed us to examine how classes function differently depending on instructional mode. While we did not replicate the findings of most research on the effects of such instruction on composing products, we learned a great deal about classroom processes by studying the differences in student participation in the two modes.

7. *In that we had to reach agreement in evaluating the pretests and posttests, our collaboration forced us to discuss and clarify our conceptions of what we expected students to learn from the instruction.* We took several essays and went through them carefully to determine our scoring system. If the essays were to inform our assessment of the instruction, we needed to examine and clarify how we expected the instruction to improve student writing. Our intensive analysis of the essays led us to a high level of agreement (.88) on the factors that we identified as important in the students' writing, and forced us to explore in great depth the relationship between various facets of Ann's teaching and the ways in which students revealed their understanding in writing.

We propose this type of collaboration as a model for ways in which student teachers and cooperating teachers can work together to conduct classroom research. The structured responsibility of charting classroom processes gives the cooperating teacher a clearly defined role to guide observation and evaluation, and the resulting discussions provide a forum for examination of instructional effectiveness. Such collaborative research establishes a channel that promotes both mutual inquiry and

mutual understanding, and helps develop salutary habits for the continual evaluation of the relationship between teaching and learning.

University of Oklahoma
College of Education
820 Van Fleet Oval
Norman, OK 73019

Works Cited

- Bloom, B. (1954). The thought process of students in discussion. In S. French, (Ed.), *Accent on teaching: experiments in general education*. New York: Harper.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. & Larson, R. (1984). *Being adolescent: conflict and growth in the teenage years*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hillocks, G. (1986). *Research on written composition: new directions for teaching*. Urbana, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication and National Conference on Research in English.
- Jordahl, A. (in progress). *The effects of two modes of instruction on generalization and support*. Master's thesis, University of Chicago.
- Myers, M. (1985). *The teacher-researcher: how to study writing in the classroom*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- North, S. (1987). *The making of knowledge in composition: portrait of an emerging field*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Smagorinsky, P. & Jordahl, A. (1990). A student teacher-cooperating teacher collaborative study of the effects of instructional mode on generalization and support. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Boston.
- Strieb, L. (1985). *A Philadelphia teacher's journal*. North Dakota Study Group Center for Teaching and Learning. Grand Forks, ND: Center for Teaching and Learning.