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Research Matters

What Research Matters

For this issue on transforming English teaching, we asked four educators to describe a research study that had been transformative for them and to explain how. As you will see, each person took a different approach to that question.

Research That Makes a Difference

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I discovered that research could make a difference to me as a teacher in 1986, the year I took *Methods of Teaching English* from Dr. Michael Flanagan and just before I began student teaching. Dr. Flanagan didn't use a textbook; instead, he required us to subscribe to *English Journal* and buy a course packet that contained what I thought of as the real stuff of teaching—lesson plans and sample units. The course packet also included something else that I didn't expect to think of as the “real stuff” at that point in my teaching: a recent research report by George Hillocks Jr. entitled “What Works in Teaching Composition: A Meta-Analysis of

Experimental Treatment Studies” (*American Journal of Education* 93.1 [1984]: 133–70). As the “meta” part of his title suggests, Hillocks “analyzed the analysis,” reviewing close to five hundred studies, selecting the best of those, and then comparing their results to determine which kinds of writing instruction worked best.

What I remember most about the article was not how difficult it was to read. (After all, if we English teachers can decipher Chaucerian tales and Elizabethan poetry, we can handle dense texts written in research vernacular.) Rather, I remember being equally as wowed by the fact that Dr. Flanagan had been one of Hillocks's students as I was by the charts that condensed the article's findings. First of all, Dr. Flanagan knew this guy and valued what he had to say, so I should pay attention. Second, those two charts were pretty revealing in their own right.

The first of these suggests that the “mode” of teaching, that is, how a teacher delivers instruction, matters; the second demonstrates that the “focus,” or content, of that instruction matters as well. Both charts clearly indicate that some modes and foci work far better than others. I remember thinking as I studied the article in 1986 that if Hillocks had analyzed vir-

tually all of the research on written composition available at the time and boiled it down into two charts that revealed that all writing instruction was not created equal, shouldn't I, shouldn't all English teachers, pay attention?

Even though the meta-analysis challenged my schooling experience and has made my teaching row a hard one to hoe at times because I've chosen to teach writing in less-traditional ways, it continues to influence my teaching. Reading it helped me understand for the first time how the professional conversation outside of my classroom could influence what happened inside of it. That awareness has not only shaped how I work with writers on a daily basis but has also kept me reading *English Journal* and other professional literature to stay abreast of new research. It eventually inspired me to contribute to the professional conversation myself by joining professional organizations such as NCTE and the National Writing Project, participating in conferences, and conducting and writing about my research.

Today, when I teach courses on how to teach writing to students who are studying to be English teachers, I still hold up Hillocks's charts. For me, they serve as iconic

reminders of how research can make a difference.

Roundabout Research

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Stepping back and looking at the more than three decades of my teaching, two research reports on composition stand out as formative in my classroom instruction and mentorship of other teachers. *Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching* by George Hillocks Jr. (Urbana: NCTE, 1986) guided a research study I conducted on prewriting. I found that students' attitudes toward writing improved as a result of various prewriting activities. My teaching changed.

Like Hillocks's work, *Research on Composition: Multiple Perspectives on Two Decades of Change*, edited by Peter Smagorinsky (Columbia: Teachers College, 2006), has become my go-to source. The organization of this book differs from Hillocks's in a number of ways. The ten chapters focus on areas such as published research exclusively unless published as teacher research, international material as well as that written in languages other than English, a broadened scope to include writing with the assistance of tools such as computers and drawing, and work published between 1984 and 2003, along with other thoughtful distinctions.

One chapter that has proven useful in my teaching and collegial conversations is "Family and Community Literacies" by Ellen Cushman, Stuart Barbier, Catherine

Mazak, and Robert Petrone. Noting the historical progression from orality to literacy, the authors cite Szwed in commenting on "five elements of literacy—text, context, function, participants, and motivation," to gain a better understanding of the "social meaning of literacy" (Szwed, qtd. in Cushman et al. 189). Using this idea as a starting point, I developed a literacy event that attempted to move to one "founded on community, not school-based practices." Using Judith Ortiz Cofer's short memoir "The Last Word," a retelling of an adult conversation with her mother about a disputed childhood event, I asked students to discuss a shared significant memory with a parent or guardian.

Cofer finished her piece with the belief that her mother is the final voice in such memories, and I attempt to examine this issue in the activity. Once the experience is agreed on, I ask students to write their renditions of the moment. We experiment with various revision and extension strategies such as Barry Lane's "exploded moment" and genre shifts from prose to poetry or dialogue. I send a letter home to the adult, asking him or her to write a retelling of the same event, stressing content over correctness and emphasizing the need for details from the adult perspective. After three weeks, students use the adult writing and "merge" the two, adding details from the adult view into their revised recollection. Using italic, bold, or underlined format for the adult addition, students develop a hybridized writing. The last word, pun intended, comes from a conversation and reflection in which

the writer comments on the pros and cons of the changes and expression of opinion about the activity. Judging from the parent and student responses, I continue this along with an extra-credit "portfolio share" at the end of the year for parent and student contact.

Interestingly enough, my professional contact with research has been circuitous yet circular. For it was Smagorinsky's work I read as a teacher finishing a master's degree in gifted education. In *Expressions: Multiple Intelligences in the English Class*, one volume in the NCTE Theory and Research Into Practice series (Urbana: NCTE, 1991), I learned about Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. Little did I know that this small text would be replaced in my teaching by his edited collection of research in composition. The world is a wheel, indeed.

Mindfully Teaching Reading

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"What is the difference between reading activities and reading strategies?" Dr. Gayle Morrison of the University of Alabama at Birmingham asked me last summer. Flummoxed, I countered that I, like most English teachers, teach the great ideas of literature—from *David Copperfield* to *The Great Gatsby* to *The Kite Runner*. But, Morrison's question was timely five years after the passage of NCLB. More and more I am teaching students how to read a text strategically instead of simply

teaching the text with theme as a focus. Several researchers have influenced my changing perspective.

Richard Allington's research showing that volume of reading is important in nurturing effective readers has made me question if we provide students with enough opportunities to read, and if we as teachers understand how to effectively monitor that reading. Teachers who have taught the same four to six books each year of their career in a particular grade may need to read more widely and allow their students to do so, including contemporary titles and the bestsellers that students are drawn to, since they better touch the reluctant readers' interest. Allington's research indicates we cannot continue to rely solely on a limited number of whole-class works of literature if our goal is to strengthen readers. When teachers hide behind the exclusive use of whole-class works of literature, too often those units of study become units of activity and not of lifelong skill development of reading and writing strategies.

Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis's work on the six types of reading strategy clusters and the gradual release of responsibility framework has made my teaching more intentional. Helping students activate and connect their reading to background or prior knowledge, monitor for comprehension and adjust their reading behaviors when difficult passages occur in reading, infer meaning and make interpretations, ask questions, determine importance, and summarize and synthesize information provides students with skills to tackle a wide range

of challenging texts. As teachers, we need to help readers metacognitively explore their reading behaviors so they will be able to transfer those strategies from this year's high school class to independent reading in college and the workplace, especially in light of recent ACT findings that nearly half of first-year college students are not prepared for the rigors of college reading requirements.

After Morrison's question last summer, I began to analyze my classroom activities with literature and discovered I often encourage students to use actual reading *strategies*, but I had been unaware a research base existed for my classroom tasks. Now, as I choose a range and sequence of tasks for students, I keep the strategies in mind and discuss with the students which tactics they are using to understand a text. In this way, their reading of *Heart of Darkness* not only serves as a tool for extending their cultural literacy but also serves as a time to practice reading strategies that will help them independently read whatever texts come their way in the future.

Rookie Research

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As a new teacher fresh from an English education program, "research" mattered little to me. I was too busy trying to survive to even think about reports and studies. At the same time, I was coming to the somewhat sickening conclusion that I had no clue about how to reach these students. Whatever theorists might have informed my previous

program, whatever formal and progressive research I had encountered had been swept rudely from my memory. What I wanted were handouts, exercises, formulas, anything prepackaged that might get me through the day. When I wasn't mystified by waves of students who disliked reading and hated writing, I was frustrated by their sullen recalcitrance, their passive resistance to my teacher talk and rules and detention slips.

It was a sadly ironic time. Pedagogically I was living hand-to-mouth, and it quickly wore me down as a teacher. Without a philosophical basis for what I was doing, I couldn't call myself a professional: I was at best a clerk, following shaky routines without a clue as to their grounding in best practices or their origins in sound theory. I was not sure what I believed in or why, and I had no vantage point to chart a path through this terra incognita.

Fourteen years later, these visceral memories of failure and frustration have taken on a different cast; through memory and lived experience that first year has been put to many uses, serving everything from a facile cynicism to an emerging liberatory philosophy. One example: Early on, my rookie year morphed from trite evidence of the grim state of today's youth to a personal case study of schooling as a means of indoctrination, suppression, and conformity. Reading Henry A. Giroux before I'd started teaching was a tedious homework assignment soon forgotten. Encountering his work again in graduate school, I still found it tedious, but I couldn't deny its vital relevance as filtered through my experience.

This is a pattern I still rely on. I'll be reading something by George Hillocks Jr., nodding along, finding that his research and insight match and inform the landscape of my teaching experiences, and then I'll suddenly realize that *I've read this before*, at some point when I had been unable to see its relevance as interpreter or guide for my practice. In the years since that first teaching gig, my classroom experiences—or rather, the sudden relevance of these experiences as I read what others say, think, and do—have emerged as my most important research tool. And behind all of my teaching moments lies that first year, that archetypal experience, that *ur*-research.

To boost the confidence of pre-service teachers in my advanced English methodology classes as they prepare for their first significant field experience, I show them clips from my rookie year. Like time travel or magic, there I am again with the high-and-tight haircut, the awkward wardrobe, the Doogie Howser expression. We watch as my doppelganger lectures and talks, on and on. He ignores opportunities to ask engaging questions. He sticks tenaciously to a script. Students enter the classroom energetic and talkative, and in five minutes, he reduces the room to a torpid purgatory. Something of a joker, my old mentor teacher pans the camera around the

class, zooming in on students sleeping, passing notes, staring into space. Watching myself, I gain fresh perspective on that old frustration and hopelessness, even as I feel it again . . . only now we can hold it up and examine it as a class.

The students marvel at my poor example, asking questions that force me back along those echoing paths, revisiting, rethinking. It's a good way to ease anxieties (surely if their professor can have such an inglorious start to his career, they too will be all right) but I hope something subtler emerges from this demonstration as well: the value of their lives as sources of research, starting now.