Leading from the Classroom: Teacher as Researcher

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I have a confession: I wanted to be an anthropologist. I even earned a master’s degree in the field. Yet, during my ninth year teaching English language arts, I recognized I am living my Margaret-Mead-dream, just altered from what I originally envisioned. You see, I have participants: my students. I frequently share ethnographies with others: the stories I tell about my experiences. And, upon my participation in Classroom Teachers Enacting Positive Solutions (CTEPS), I conduct research—action research.

All teachers have the ability to complete action research. We do it every day: we experiment with activities, we reflect on data, and we make informed decisions. In fact, we as teachers often tout what we do as *best practice* but without the evidence to convince others to agree with us. And, we often question administrators and policymakers when they dictate a test preparatory curriculum, veiled as a *best practice program*, to us. But how do we truly know what we know, unless we test our theories directly on the ground with our students, rather than trust or distrust the ideas from those distanced from students?

Understanding what it takes to help students make inferences from complex texts remains central to my practice. So, I often wonder what is *best practice* to help students achieve this skill? This year I allowed myself the opportunity to pursue this query by applying for CTEPS. I began by wondering what type of curriculum both engages students in literacy and helps them derive meaning from what they read? Then I formulated this research question: Do our local teacher-developed units of study with collaboratively generated materials serve our students best? Or, ultimately, do those test preparation guides—sometimes thrust upon us to use—do a better job of teaching students the skills they need to excel? Both types of curricula derive from the standards, both focus on skills, both have the summative goal of increasing student ability to make inferences—so which actually works best?

To answer my inquiries, I developed a basic timeline for research. I read literature concerning literacy skills necessary to succeed in the 21st Century, how to impart the value of reading to students, and types of literacy instruction. Next, I developed my unit with my colleagues and taught it—something I do each year. Then, I reviewed the test preparation unit, again with my colleagues, and taught it—something I do when my administrators suggest it. In other words: I designed and reviewed my methods then implemented each unit—one after the other—with fidelity with the same group of students. At the end of each unit, I assessed the same students using multiple-choice questions concerning inferences from unfamiliar passages. The assessments for each of the two units did not vary in length or skill, only by content. I prepared myself for the worst: I thought, “Finally I’ll have proof that test preparation works for kids. Then I’ll have to look for a new career.”

Ultimately, I analyzed my quantitative data by comparing the outcomes of the assessments: my students more consistently made accurate inferences following our locally developed unit (which happened earlier in the school year) then they did after the test preparation unit. So, what did this tell me? Reminding myself of my role as an anthropologist, I surveyed the teachers and students involved in the study to collect qualitative data as well. The survey results indicated that not only did the teachers and students find the locally developed curriculum more effective and more engaging, they also felt it led to greater success in regards to literacy development overall than the test preparation unit. I had an answer to my original research question: units of study, designed by us experts currently in the field, serve our students best when it comes to literacy, particularly reading and making sense of complex texts. This research provided me with clear evidence that my intuition as a teacher, regarding literacy instruction, *can* and *should* serve my students well.

The process of leading from the classroom involves a cycle of learning, teaching, reviewing, and improving. Read. Research. Reflect. Then start again. While I may no longer have the job title of cultural anthropologist, I have research—action research—that ensures the observations I make, and the ethnographies I share, have direct, positive impacts on the participants I serve. We are all anthropologists: start with a question and empower yourself to seek the answer. To see examples of action research projects, including my work and data, please visit: <http://www.kycteps.org/>.

