THE TEACHER AS RESEARCHER

I began to be a teacher-researcher accidentally, when I started keeping a journal early in my teaching career. So much went on during a school day and it all happened so fast. I knew that writing about what was happening to me somehow gave me control over my experience and that by studying what I had written I could begin to understand what was happening. There were so many people brushing past me, people that I needed to understand if I was going to teach them. Writing down what I saw and reading back over it later helped me learn to teach, but I did not think of what I was doing as research.

In fact, I shared a general teacher prejudice against educational research. Teachers do not have much time to read research journals and when they do, they are too tired to plow through jargon, charts, and statistics to find information that would improve their teaching. They are also prejudiced against research that seems to assume that their particular classroom and its active, changing inhabitants do not exist. They read results from matched sets of control and experimental groups and shrug, aware of the multitude of variables operating in any classroom.

The resistance that I felt to research was also caused because much of it was done either by short-term visitors to the classroom or researchers who never actually appeared at all. Instead an intermediary, usually a teacher, handed out forms for the students to fill in. Somewhere else these forms were checked, compiled, and statistically manipulated in a computer. The conclusions rarely filtered back to the subjects or intermediaries.

Teachers are familiar with statistical data—grades, health and absentee records, test scores—but these are reminders to most teachers not of the usefulness of numerical data but of its inadequacies. Teachers of writing are especially uncertain about scores on tests which purport to measure writing skills but do not require students to write.

Among writing researchers there are an increasing number who acknowledge the importance of case studies done in context and do not rely simply on compiling numerical data. The studies of researchers such as Janet Emig, Donald Graves, and Nancy Sommers have a sound of reality that makes them both readable and helpful to teachers. But even this role of the researcher—present in the classroom, observing and recording information in context—is difficult to accept for teachers who see
their responsibility as transferring knowledge to their students.

Perhaps the roles of teacher and researcher inevitably collide. Teachers feel the need to impart knowledge, to show students what they know about their subject. Researchers want to find out what goes on in the classroom, to understand what the students do when they are learning. Teachers do not stand back and look at what goes on without also suggesting solutions to problems. Researchers maintain objectivity toward their subjects, not attempting to effect change.

For writing teachers to become researchers as well, they have to accept the close relationship between the writing process and the human growth process, because it is this close relationship that makes context so important to an understanding of writing. Writing is in and of context. The personal moves upon the paper can be encouraged, discussed, described, even looked at from an angle, but they cannot be successfully taught or understood as single words in a series. Teachers—researchers need to notice the details of their writing classes’ experiences with great care, as if they too are students in that room, learning and growing within its context. It is this development that I recognize happening to me in the records of my journal.

The change began when I misspelled the word aggressive on a spelling list I had written on the blackboard. The students had accepted my spelling (which was missing an s) and copied the word onto their lists. Later in the week I gave them a practice exercise. Again aggressive was missing an s. Fortunately one student in the class was brave enough to bring the misspelling to my attention. In my journal I have recorded the gentle teaching method of that student. She said that she assumed that her dictionary was incorrect, but she had noticed a difference between the spelling I had given them and the spelling given in the dictionary. Grimly I told the class that I had made a mistake and showed it to them, asking them to recopy the word correctly. I said that I would add it to my list of spelling words. They looked at me quizzically, amused at the idea.

During the days between my acknowledgment of the error and the test, one or another of the students would quiz me on the word, a little hesitantly but enjoying the situation, to see if I had mastered it yet. Eventually I did. On the test day aggressive was the only word that every student in the class spelled correctly.

When I considered all this in my journal, I thought of pretending to make a lot of mistakes during the year in hopes that it would increase the students’ learning. As it turned out, I did not have to pretend. The humiliation of not knowing everything catches up with every teacher. One way I found to live with it was to begin asking why things happened the way they did in my classes, to become a student of my students, encouraging them to teach me about the way they learned.

As I begin watching my students more carefully, other changes took place in the way I taught. I had been recording for some time my irritation with the various noises and motions that students made when they were supposed to be writing. Invariably the aspiring drummers for the school band congregated in my ninth grade writing classes. Other students wriggled constantly and made a variety of strange noises. At first I thought these sounds were early signals of insurrection and needed to be stopped. One day I was writing about their movements and noises in my journal and I became so involved in describing that I didn’t attempt to stop them. Everyone wrote longer than usual.

When the period was almost over I told them what had happened and read, using no names, what I had written about their actions. One of the drummers said that drumming his fingers on the desk or rhythmically jumping his knee up and down kept him writing. We began talking about noisy environments as opposed to quiet ones. They said that when they really became involved with what they were writing they forgot what they were doing. Their small habits, they said, were part of their writing processes. We all became more tolerant of each others’ idiosyncrasies as a result of our discussion, and I began to make these observations with all my writing classes as a way of helping them understand how they wrote.

What they wrote about caused another change in the way I taught writing. In my early journal there were repeated efforts to list composition topics. I poured over teacher-hint books, adding to my lists. Yet every time I gave suggestions to my students there was at least one who didn’t like anything on the list. One day, after having another topic list rejected, I told the students to come up with a topic themselves. At first they were stunned. I stood there looking at them and wondering what to do next. Suddenly topics started flowing fast and free, and I quickly started writing them down on the blackboard. As they came up with more and more ideas, some students stopped talking and started writing. Now, in some classes we make up and publish a class topic list so each student has a copy of everyone’s ideas. Sometimes I have them add a personal topic list to the class list. When I began doing research on what topics students want to write about, their writing became livelier and they became more involved with it and therefore more eager to develop and revise it.

As we wrote together and discussed our writing with each other, the students did become more convinced of the value of revision, but I was unsure of the best way to help them with comments and conferences. First I stopped marking drafts of their papers because they told me that once they had

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received a grade, the process seemed over to them. They said they found it most helpful when I asked them questions while they were working on a writing. I started asking them what they were dissatisfied with in their drafts. I asked them if I had figured out their main ideas correctly. I asked them to tell me more about parts of their research that seemed skimpy. I used question marks to help them locate, within a line of writing, where their mechanical mistakes lurked.

I am currently working on a project with some students to define the revision process. They have written descriptions of their own writing processes and I am putting what they have written together to discuss with them. They will help me revise what I have written, adding, deleting, making sure I have recorded accurately what they have observed. As we revise together their theories of revision, both they and I will better understand the process.

The day I planned to show the fifth and sixth period writing classes my first draft of what they had said about revision, a pep rally was scheduled between those periods. Each class would last for only half an hour. Subtract from that the time it takes the band members, cheerleaders, and pep club members to leave early from fifth and return late to sixth. Consider the students who do not make it back at all to the last period of the day. I know—any teacher would know—that trying to conduct a rational discussion in the time remaining would be foolhardy. The pep rally schedule is one of the many variables of the context in which my research takes place. These variables are frequently out of my control, but they are a part of the real world of my writing classes.

Keeping a journal of the context and discoveries of my teaching days has helped me to learn from my experiences and observations. Looking at teaching as research has made me more of a professional by making me more of a student. And, paradoxically, I am convinced that the model of a student that I provide for my students to observe will help them to become better students themselves.

Marian M. Mohr is a Fellow of the Northern Virginia Writing Project.