Books

Joseph Check and Roberta Logan

INSIDE/OUTSIDE: TEACHER RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE

Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan L. Lytle
Teachers College Press, 1993

Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle believe that important knowledge about teaching is generated both inside school classrooms and outside them, in the university, and they have crafted a book that amply represents both sources. In Part I of the book they treat the “outside” perspective in five essays collected as “Concepts and Contexts for Teacher Research.” Part II, “Teachers on Teaching, Learning, and Schooling,” presents some twenty-one different pieces of teacher research, divided into four broad categories: Journals, Oral Inquiries, Classroom and School Studies, and Essays.

In the spirit of the book’s central dichotomy, the authors of this review have chosen to discuss it in the form of a dialogue between an “insider” and an “outsider.” Roberta Logan is a sixth grade social studies teacher in the Boston Public Schools and a teacher researcher with the Boston Writing Project. Joseph Check is associate dean of the Graduate College of Education at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and director of the Boston Writing Project.

JC: It’s interesting to me that we both had the same reaction when we talked about doing this review: “Let’s read the second half of the book first.” The shorter, teacher-written pieces seemed a more accessible entry point than the history, conceptual framework, typology, definition, and analysis of teacher research that form the first part. Both parts are important, and having both within the same covers exemplifies an important tenet that the book advocates: intellectual interchange between teacher and university researchers. But we both felt it was easier to begin by dipping into the teacher researcher studies and then going back to the theoretical section.

RL: As a teacher researcher, Roberta, what jumped out at you about this book?

RL: I was startled to see how differently each teacher approaches what teacher research is. If I were not already involved in teacher research, the question I would have is, “Well, how do I get started?” In this book, there are many, many possibilities.

For instance, the section on journals was interesting because it showed the use of journals in three different ways. In the article by Mickey Harris, who is a high school teacher (“Looking Back: Twenty Years of a Teacher’s Journal”), you see the individual working on her own and keeping a journal about what happens in her classroom, because she liked to do it. Mickey Harris lives the life of a teacher, and she captures it really well. There are sparkling images of what happens for her, and her feelings, which carry you through twenty years of her life. It’s not a documentation of something in particular that she’s doing in her classroom, even though it’s clear that she’s doing many wonderful things.

Whereas Deborah Jumpp and Lynne Strieb (“Journals for Collaboration, Curriculum, and Assessment,” “Visiting and Revisiting the Trees”) have some specific goals they’re looking at in relationship to student journals, so there’s a lot of careful documentation. Jumpp and Strieb present data from the journals, as well as conversations with students and between teachers, so journal keeping for these teacher researchers is a much more constructed process.

Taken together, these three articles show many possibilities of one modality. They illustrate the
wide-openness of teacher research, that it does not have to have one particular form, and that all of it leads to reflection. Each is an interesting way into thinking about a teacher’s practice. A new teacher could read Mickey Harris’s journal, Lynne Strieb’s journal, and Deborah Jump and Lynne Strieb’s collaboration and learn something from each. And an experienced teacher who’s never kept a journal could say, “Well, let me try this.”

JC: I really liked the “Essay” section. Bob Fecho’s piece, “Reading As a Teacher,” was the first one I read, and it stayed with me. The whole notion of teachers reading, or in most instances not reading, university-based research, the “outside” perspective, has a pretty direct bearing on teacher research with its “inside” perspective and close links between research and classroom practice.

Bob’s essay explores and describes a distinctive style of reading when he’s “reading as a teacher.” He talks about when he was out of the classroom for a year, in graduate school, reading Shirley Brice-Heath as a graduate student, then going back to the classroom the next year, and going back to the book, and it was as if it were a different book. He was looking for much different things in it based on the fact that he was in a classroom every day, and he was reading as a teacher.

When he reads a novel, he’s just like anybody else who’s reading a novel, but there are certain times when he’s reading like a teacher, and he believes that that constitutes a specific kind of reading that’s worth looking at and defining. He argues that “… unless teachers seriously consider what it means to read educational theory and to research as teachers, we will continue to replicate the administrative and research communities that exist. Consequently, our voice will not be heard except as an echo” (p.266). To me, this was a great example of a piece of research that could only have been done by a teacher.

Did anything stand out for you in this section?

RL: Reading this section let me into other teachers’ real worlds. Shirley Brown’s essay, “Lighting Fires,” describes her work with urban teen-aged pregnant girls and young mothers. I see those children, those students, those young women all the time, but as a middle school teacher, I don’t know what happens to their lives. This article shows me the commitment of somebody who works with a group of students who are in a really difficult life situation, and how she thinks through her understanding of politics and how she brings that political understanding into her classroom. You don’t get the steps, but you get a sense of the generativeness of the inquiry process, and a feeling that any teacher can look at her own practice in a similarly thoughtful way. Shirley does this within the context of her essay.

This section gave me a sense that there’s a community of people who are taking their work very seriously — not only on a day-to-day level, but on a philosophical level. Almost every teacher I know works hard and puts in quality time with students. Reading what Shirley’s doing in Philadelphia affirms that belief. Reading what Michele Sims (“How My Question Keeps Evolving”) is doing in Philadelphia affirms that belief. It helps you along the road that you’re traveling.

JC: I think it’s different from a lot of what is getting published — the philosophical and inquiry or reflective element makes it different, because these are not people who are saying, “I’m a successful teacher, why don’t you do what I do.” Or “Let me give you a few tips for how to teach the essay better.” These are people who are looking at their own teaching, and letting you look with them, or sharing the looking, in a sense. And so it really is like being part of a community of teachers who are not focused in the superficial sense on improving pedagogy. There are no tricks here that you use Monday morning.

RL: My phrase for it at the moment is “It’s not the snippet for success.” It’s that hard and careful and sometimes painful looking.
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JC: And it assumes that that's part of teaching. It assumes that we're in a profession that has some growth over time, and that time and growth by their very nature raise questions that need to be looked at. It's clear that the people who are writing here are teachers. And that they see this kind of reflection, either individually or in a community, as helping them to be good teachers. A part of what makes them good teachers is continually asking questions.

RL: That "good teacher" term makes me a little uncomfortable. The one essay that shows teacher research can be used even by beginning teachers is "Leaving the Script Behind." It describes a young group of student teachers who have to do two lessons, one with a script and one without a script. There is no assumption in that group that they are all good teachers. There's only the assumption that they're in a class that has required them to do this. And I think you can look at that essay and say, "Has this been a helpful thing for that group of young teachers to be expected and required to do?" and I think the answer is yes, because they have to examine their negative assumptions about basal readers and scripted monologues of what you should say to children, and then look at what they do if they don't have that script. I think this exercise can be used as a tool in the process of training a teacher to be a teacher. So teacher research shouldn't be limited to only good, experienced teachers.

JC: I like the notion that first-year teachers, student teachers, and people who've been teaching for twenty years are all represented as having something to say, that there's a whole lot of different ways to raise questions and to do inquiry without aping traditional, university-based research. The people in this book were doing something that made sense to them immediately as teachers. That's really important. I'm sure that over the twenty years when Mickey Harris was keeping her journal, she wasn't doing it because she was thinking of publishing it. The purpose of what these teachers are doing doesn't refer to getting published or handing in a paper for a class or some external audience. It refers to their own practice and their own understanding of what they're doing with kids. Their work is not in the first instance for presentation to any audience outside themselves. In the first instance, it's to help them teach. So in that sense there's no gap at all between research and practice, which of course has been one of the huge problem areas with traditional educational research.

Well, Roberta, what about the "theoretical" part of the book, "Concepts and Contexts for Teacher Research," the first hundred pages, written by Susan Lytle and Marilyn Cochran-Smith?

RL: I found the first part of the book much more approachable after dipping into the second half, because there are so many connections between the two parts. For example, I haven't had a lot of experience reading educational research, even though I've been teaching for twenty years, and I question why I haven't had that experience. That research literature hasn't been in my environment, and I haven't sought it out. And I think a lot of teachers have had the same experience. Some reasons for that situation are analyzed in the first section.

But you're the university person — what did you think about the first section?

JC: In the first place I think it's important to grasp the scope of what the authors are trying to do. It's ambitious. As far as I know, no one else is thinking on the scale that they are.

They're trying to define teacher research, both in abstract categories and by way of concrete examples ("Learning from Teacher Research: a Working Typology"); they're trying to identify its history and provenance and explore its epistemological basis and implications ("Teacher Research: a Way of Knowing"); and they're trying to create a theoretical framework for looking at teacher research in relationship to both traditional re-
search methodologies and traditional working relationships between universities and schools ("Research on Teaching and Teacher Research: the Issues that Divide"). And in the last essay ("Communities for Teacher Research: Fringe or Forefront?") they discuss cutting-edge questions in the field: if teacher research communities are to be institutionalized as part of the regular work of teachers, what obstacles are in the way? Is teacher research just another form of research, or is it something qualitatively different, something that by raising basic questions of how knowledge gets created in education will begin to transform the way universities and schools work together? Is teacher research, as many people have claimed, one of the most effective forms of professional development that school systems can engage in?

As you mentioned, Roberta, one of the obstacles to the formation of teacher research communities identified by Cochran-Smith and Lytle is the reputation of traditional educational research: "Teachers' suspicions and even contempt for educational research are hardly surprising, given that research has been used to blame teachers for the failings of the larger educational and sociopolitical systems. Research is often called on as the rationale for school systems to train and retrain teachers in a wide variety of areas, and as the grist for countless checklists, scripts for teaching and evaluation schemes ... which have deskilled teachers by regarding them as replaceable and fixable parts in the larger educational machinery" (88-89).

All in all, I think this is an outstanding book that will appeal to multiple audiences: teacher researchers, of course, and university faculty working with them; experienced teachers, school administrators, and university faculty who want to learn about teacher research in a way that combines theory and practice, inside and outside perspectives. People working with student teachers will also find a lot here. This book offers theory, practice, critique, description, and a very sophisticated analysis of the major challenges facing teacher research as a developing field.

Any last thoughts, Roberta?

RL: I agree with you about the multiple audiences, and I just want to add one thing: It's nice to see so many working teachers in print.

Pat Carney-Dalton

A DOOR OPENS: WRITING IN FIFTH GRADE

by Jack Wilde
Heinemann, 1993

While we teach, we learn. Seneca

Setting up my classroom in August of 1990, my mind was filled with ideas I couldn't wait to try. I had just participated in the University of New Hampshire's Writing Program and was instructed by Jack Wilde, a graduate of the Exeter Writing Project and a ten-year veteran of the University of New Hampshire writing program. Through group discussions and Jack's examples of student writing, I reexamined my teaching techniques, excitedly throwing out some of the old and integrating the new.

One such reexamination targeted the required fifth grade report in our curriculum. As both a student and a teacher, I hated the written report. The routine was always the same: the students chose an area to research, took notes using encyclopedias, magazines, and books, but no matter how they tried, the reports sounded like the encyclopedia. As much as I encouraged the students "to make it interesting," the reports were boring and had no real audience; yet I had become chained to the sacred report as the recognized mode of