



# Dialogue

A Publication of the San Diego Area Writing Project

Summer 2003

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**Welcome to this special Teacher Research issue of the Dialogue. The temptation to define a teacher researcher is looming, as many of you may be wondering what makes a teacher researcher a teacher researcher. Keep reading. The writing found in this issue is composed by teacher researchers. After reading this issue of the Dialogue, you will have more than a definition of teacher researcher: you will have living, breathing examples.**

**We thought it would be best as a point of entry into this issue to begin with an interview of someone who epitomizes the teacher researcher in our project: Kim Douillard. Kim Douillard has made an indelible footprint in the project. Kim has been teaching for the past fifteen years. Currently she team-teaches a multi-age 1-3 class at Cardiff Elementary School (since 1994). She is the recipient of the James Moffett Award for outstanding teacher research. With a look at her resumé, you'll see a pattern: She serves as SDAWP's co-director and has been a fellow since 1992. She is the Coordinator of Professional Development and a teacher with professional development at the cornerstone of her practice. She has been Co-Coordinator of Young Writers' Camp and a teacher there. She is on the editorial board of NCTE's Language Arts and she has published in several publications, including NCTE's Language Arts. Kim has been a teacher researcher since the inception of SDAWP's teacher research group in 1996 and now serves as the group's facilitator.**

*Kim, you have been involved with Teacher Research through SDAWP for seven years. Tell us a little about your first introduction to Teacher Research.*

My introduction to teacher research almost wasn't an introduction at all. There was a California Writing Project mini-grant called the reading initiative. Marcia called all the elementary level teacher consultants together to write the mini-grant—only she just told us to dream the best possible professional development. We wanted to read, write, and talk to each other about our students—and in order to do that, we would need to watch our students closely. After getting the grant, the "mostly primary" group decided to focus on struggling students. In fact, we all studied the same question, following a high, middle, and low students. (We were guarding against having "the" student we were following leave our class or our school.) That first year we ended up writing a case study on our struggling student. I learned a tremendous amount about myself that year. I learned that I knew a lot. I learned to trust students to tell me what I needed to know to teach them. I found out that I actually liked the research and that I was willing to read, try out, observe—I loved to innovate. I never hesitated to try something new. I learned that the writing pushed my thinking. It was that year that made me confident that I was a professional who knew something. I also learned to be skeptical of "research" and "easy answers."

*(See Kim Douillard, continued on page 31)*

# Teaching the Essay Genre

Can teachers simultaneously foster creativity and organization?

— Pamela A. Barger —

The September 2000 school year presented the same concern that has dogged me for years: what is the most effective teaching model for essay writing? Is it just a matter of teaching form and structure for the essay and then helping students develop a good writing style (appeal to your audience, use your voice, show-don't tell, provide plenty of specifics) within the structure? Or does it begin with fostering good writing habits (journal writing, writing workshop, and process writing with plenty of response) followed by teaching the essay form?

I want my students to write with ownership and creativity; I don't want them to be tied to structure, much less structure imposed by some graphic organizer designed by someone else. And yet, don't beginners in every endeavor use basic rules and instructions as a starting point for understanding so they will feel more comfortable taking risks later on? And isn't it true that some of the most creative endeavors have been born in the tightest of structure? (Mozart's symphony # 40, Shakespeare's sonnets, for example). The key is surely in balance. How much instruction/structure do we teachers provide to ensure the basic understanding of essay writing and at the same time foster the creativity that reflects true ownership?

There must be a balance in the writing classroom that enables budding writers to write essays that adhere to basic expectations of organization and content while developing their own unique and creative writing style.

This issue is a particular concern for me as a sixth grade teacher because I am responsible for teaching essays. Ah! Essays! Those writ-

ing pieces that are clear, concise, and well organized, with all the obligatory parts such as thesis statement, supporting details, topic sentences, dynamic conclusions.

(...I hear my voice sounding the mantra).

I have to admit that for the most part, my students learn how to write a basic essay, particularly the character analysis paper we write, at least three times a year. After all, I provide the reason to write (We have finished a novel. Doesn't everyone want to write an essay about a character?). I provide the graphic organizer (I show them how to plan the essay). I provide modeling (so they can see what a real character analysis looks like/sounds like). I present mini-lessons (How to write engaging leads, how to show/not tell, how to use sentence starters that guarantee complex sentences). I encourage them to use details, surprise the reader, and connect to the universal.

I know choice is important. So students choose their characters to analyze (okay, so I limit the choice here, for a perfectly sound reason, I assure them: The character has to be one we know well enough to discuss).

And during the process, I provide the setting where peer conferences take place and teacher conferences occur. I guide their revision process, helping them to see the parts of the paper and (hopefully) how they fit together to make the polished final copy.

And sure enough, the final copy emerges, prepared according to directions.

Why, you might ask, am I not satisfied? The truth is, often I am. Yet there are other times when "my" instruction is too obvious in the final copy. I read an essay by a student whose journal writing or poetry has inspired me, and I wonder why the same style and voice are not in the essay. Is it because the essay is at the beginning stage? Is the writer so involved with understanding basic organization that there is just not enough writing energy for creativity? Or, am I encouraging the flatness I hear by having provided the structure in the first place?

What can I do to foster the individual writing style of each writer and at the same time teach them to write a clear, concise, well-organized essay? I decided to make some changes in my instruction. I was in search of the balance between structure and creativity.

What would happen if my students and I focused more on understanding the power of writing and less on the specific structure of the essay?

Last September I decided to focus

in Possible Lives: The Promise of  
Public Education in America, Mike  
Rose works against the negative  
view of public schools that  
schools that do not work.  
does this largely by changing the  
parameters of the debate. While  
he also uses a lot of evidence, he  
is careful not to universalize the sto-  
ries he tells. He uses a lot of exam-  
ples of teaching practices that work  
only in some schools, but not to  
universalize these anecdotes, and  
not to claim universal excellence.  
Hirsch, on the other hand, uses  
anecdotal stories to claim universal  
decline in public schools; this  
may be compelling to some, but it  
makes for slow, irresponsible  
argument. It is important to find  
ways to understand and expose this  
kind of argument. This is not  
to say what Rose is doing is not  
really what we need. It is, however, to  
say that it is, however, to  
find the kinds of responses made to such

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## **About the Contributors**

**Pam Barger (SDAWP 1995)** currently teaches at Cal State Marcos as a Teacher-in-Residence. This is her second year teaching a prerequisite course for the Credential Program as well as courses that are part of the program. She will return to teaching upper elementary in the Del Mar School District in Fall, 2005. Pam spent only one full year with the Teacher Research Group but looks forward to returning to the group when she is back in the classroom. Her present assignment definitely focuses on best practices (and theory) so she is anticipating changes in her classroom and her research about them, as well.

**Caroline Esposito (SDAWP 1998)** has taught at Warner Elementary School since 1989, with most of these years in a multiage classroom. She feels very fortunate to have had the opportunity to learn with many of the same children for several years. This year, she is teaching a 4th-5th-6th multiage class of 26 students. Carolyn calls working with the Teacher Research group for the past four years "an inspiration (that) encourages me to continually question my teaching." Most importantly, she enjoys the time spent with teachers sharing successes and challenges.

**Kathryn Ford** is a peer coach staff developer at King Elementary in the San Diego Unified School District. King is a K-5 partnership school of UCSD. Kathy attended SDAWP's year-round open institute in 2000.

**Kathleen L. Gallagher (SDAWP 1999)** has taught elementary/middle school for 17 years. She has taught all grade levels and this year is focusing solely on the teaching of mathematics. She holds a Master of Arts degree in Education from UCSD. She has been continually involved with Teacher Research since participating in the SDAWP Invitational Institute in 1999.

**Danan McNamara (SDAWP 1999)** is a teacher researcher with the San Diego Area Writing Project. A multiage teacher at Cardiff School in Cardiff-by-the-Sea, California, she believes teacher research is an essential component to teaching and learning as it promotes advocacy for teachers, students and quality education.

**Jenny Moore (SDAWP 1999)** teaches English and Creative Writing at Coronado High School. She was introduced to the teacher research experience in 1998 when she completed National Board Certification and has been a member of SDAWP's group for three years. Jenny is currently working on her Master's degree at UCSD and has an article published in *Networks*, an online teacher research journal. Jenny is also co-editor of the *Dialogue*.

**Cheryl Ritter (SDAWP 1995)** now teaches a 5th/6th grade class at Explorer Elementary Charter School in La Jolla. She began doing teacher research with the SDAWP Teacher Research Group in 1996 with Kim Douillard. During that first year of research, she fell in love with teacher dialogue and inquiry into how students learn. In the fall of 2001, she completed a Masters of Arts in Teaching and Learning from UCSD.

on this question by altering my instruction for the character analysis paper. So how did I change my instruction? First, I consciously placed the instruction on a continuum, providing more structure at the beginning of the year and less at the end of the year. For the first essay, students used the traditional graphic organizer and organization map. For the second essay students could *request* the organizer and map, and for the third essay, I planned not to provide any organizer at all. In previous years, the graphic organizer and essay map were a part of every essay instruction.

Second, I vowed to focus more on the message of the essay and the power of writing and less on the structural elements of the essay. I wanted voice in my students' essays so I needed to foster their voices and nurture their growth as writers. This was both the easy and challenging part. Easy, because I love writing and love guiding my students, modeling both the love and the struggle a writer enjoys. The challenging part was that due to scheduling changes beyond my control, no longer did I have a large block of time to devote to a true Writers' Workshop in which students had ample time to draft and confer. Though we would continue to honor the writing process, I wondered, would my students' writing grow in power and voice without having that format in place? It appeared that, through happenstance, I would have this related question to consider through the year.

And lastly, I made the decision that when I introduced the character analysis essay, I would present the organizer as a suggestion, a tool for the beginning stages, only a beginning guide. I would encourage students to see it as a basic "recipe" that needed their special ingredients to create a writing piece that was unique and surprising, as well as well organized. As sixth graders, these students were able to understand that the deciding factor for the character analysis essay was that the essay "worked," meaning the message was clear, easy to understand, and powerful in content.

By making this final decision about my teaching, I discovered that I was

automatically addressing the variety of writing levels in my classroom in a more comprehensive way. I found that for some of my students, the graphic organizer and organization map were absolutely necessary to help them understand exactly what they needed for the essay. For other students it was an appropriate strategy that gave them the tool to write with clarity and basic organization while concentrating on content. Finally, some students were already at the stage in which they could contemplate a different approach. By listening to their suggestions and discussing their options, I hoped to create the environment where their writing would grow far beyond grade level expectations.

### What happened:

Even though we did not have a sus-

points and voice. And so did the students. As the year progressed, it was clear to me that students became more confident in what they had to say and how to say it in order to have their perspective understood, exactly what good essays need.

I also feel strongly about supporting poetic writing, the kind of writing that can change a statement or fact into an invitation for personal connection. In November we created Moon Journals, following Joni Chancer's model, and we experimented with figurative language and poetic images, all connecting to the moon and our own, individual perceptions of the moon. After all, when I assigned the character analysis paper I would be asking all of the students to look at one character (I didn't change that part of the assignment, not this year), just

dow of my classroom that validates our practice. In Aristotle's words, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit." I have to admit that our increased essay writing was driven by the standards, for they clearly state that our sixth graders should be writing essays. And the frequent writing gave us more opportunities to draw similarities between good essays and what my students recognized as good writing.

And so my students wrote summary essays, persuasive essays, and reading-log essays. These were short essays, written often. And every time we faced one, we talked about good writing techniques: clarity and organization, but also voice and surprise, avoiding the predictable, and writing in such a way that their pieces were their own. We discussed writing a good thesis, but not with the traditional attitude that it was a predictable sentence simply stating the topic of the essay. As writers, we knew our audience needed to know what we were writing about and it was up to us to create the interest in our topics. Barry Lane says that a thesis is a good lead. My students and I agreed.

In fact, the essays were not just "essays" any more. I got the sense that students began to see each of the short essays as a writing piece with an important element of creativity included. I responded to each essay as I would their personal writing or narrative writing: asking questions, helping them see where they could stretch their writing, letting them know if something didn't work for me. Most importantly, I honored their writing, which meant that I listened to their points of view and offered possibilities for solving writing dilemmas so that the students were in charge of their writing.

Essay writing became a habit, not an act. And with the habit established, students began to experiment with their writing styles, so that creative writing blossomed within the tight structure of the essay. As I watched the writing change, I became very aware of my influence, power even, in setting the stage for good writing. It was a humbling experience.

**My instinct about personal writing was right. As journal writing flourished, so did the overall writing confidence of the students.**

tained period of time for Writers' Workshop, our writing community continued to support personal writing. Personal writing is a genre that develops a writer's essential voice, one that can find its way into expository essays and research reports if it is nurtured through writing regularly about what matters most to the writer. My students learn this because our class honors personal writing. First, we give it honored time: journal writing at the beginning of the day became a constant, a time when everyone would write. Then we would recognize the writing. Sharing took place, sometimes in pairs, sometimes in a "pop-up" scenario in which writers read their favorite lines or short passages. I provided optional prompts, always giving them topic choice, but I must admit, when most of the students grabbed onto a prompt (which usually told me it "hit the writing spot" that day) and we followed it with a pop-up share, there was magic in the classroom. In just a few moments I heard a myriad of view-

as I asked all of them to consider the moon. Through sharing of the Moon Journal entries, students heard different points of view, used details to explain it, and they experimented with figurative language. These elements in a character analysis paper would yield power and voice. I realize now that I did not encourage the students to make the connection between the personal writing and essay writing. I thought about it, but I neglected to bring them in on my hunch and listen to their perceptions.

Another change I made in the substance of my writing instruction was to provide more experience with essay writing. What? Yes, more essay writing, short ones done more frequently so that we had more opportunities to discuss the value of strong leads, vivid details, and organization that promoted easy reading. With this approach, the idea of writing an essay became less foreboding to the students. There is a quote posted above the south win-

At the beginning of the year, with the first character analysis paper, I modeled three styles of “attention-getters”: a question, a definition, and a quote. Sure enough, I received one of those leads on every paper. For the second CA paper, we considered ten different kinds of leads, and I also presented the idea that students could create an original approach, not one “on the list.” The effect was immediate. I began to see a wide variety of creative leads. Surprised? Not really. As a teacher, I realize that what I model is what I get. I was just dismayed that I had not realized sooner where I could “let go” and let my writers soar.

So in October, most essay leads were questions such as:

*“Have you ever wondered how scared you would be in a life and death situation? In the book Maroo of the Winter Caves, Maroo, the main character, deals with many life or death situations.”*

And in February I was still receiving questions:

*“How would you feel if you were stranded on an island where almost no one dared to go? In The Cay by Theodore Taylor, Timothy, an old sagacious African-American man knows exactly how it feels.”*

But the good news was that in February, I also received a variety of leads, spread far beyond the three modeled in October. A few, such as this one, show that creativity can thrive in the essay form:

*You’re drifting down the ocean, bobbing into what seems an endless horizon. Hope is diminishing and you’re completely helpless. Then in the blink of an eye, darkness. You have gone blind. What do you do? Phillip’s choice to panic in The Cay by Theodore Taylor was not the wisest. And if he is to survive he must overcome his immaturity, dependence and prejudice, for his only hope on a secluded cay is an old black man.*

When the final character analysis was written in May, I was pleasantly surprised when I read the students’ independent rough drafts. Not only did I see more creativity in

the leads, I also saw more confidence in their overall writing. First, they did not hesitate to write the essay. They knew what was required and set out to make their essays their own. Student examples were strong and the details they used to support their theses were less predictable. I felt that the students owned the genre.

But did the essay form overshadow their writing? In some leads, I still

***...my quest during this year yielded as much information about my teaching as it did about my students’ writing. Realizing what I should have done has been part of my discovery.***

heard the predictable sentence when the traits of the character were presented: “Through this journey Will shows he is a leader, smart and independent.” And the sentences that began each paragraph for the most part seemed predictable. “Another great trait of Will is that he is smart.” Their leads were more creative and their conclusions more dynamic, but I was not seeing the same power and style in the body of their essays. And the ironic part was that I thought I heard even less than in years past.

I came to the conclusion that in my haste to do without the organizer, in my zeal for them just to be writers and not be confined, I failed to model the “how” of doing that. In teaching the organizer less, I had also given up some important modeling and whole-class writing. In past years, as a class, we would have fun creating sentences to introduce paragraphs in unpredictable ways. Not wanting to over-teach form, I had let go of some important writing lessons. There was no doubt that the students could recognize flat writing here and there. In one student’s response to a classmate’s essay, he wrote, “It sounds too much like a resopy (recipe).” I had made them aware of the challenge to go beyond the predictable organizer, but I had focused on leads and conclusions. In throwing away the organizer too

soon, instead of using it as a starting point, I had forfeited an opportunity to show students how to let their whole essays bloom just as their leads and conclusions had done.

### **What did I learn?**

- My instinct about personal writing was right. As journal writing flourished, so did the overall writing confidence of the students.

- Poetry, both the writing and the reading of, gave us groundwork for adding the unexpected in essays. Both poetry and journal writing also provided a balance for our structured writing.
- I should present the challenge of avoiding predictable writing to my students in a more visible way. I should use models that are formulaic, and as a class, let us revise.
- Even gifted, above-grade-level writers need to be guided in organizing their papers. That was clear to me when my students wanted to let go of the organizer. I need to be ready to show them how.
- It is not organizers that are the problem. Students need to know the essential elements, the basic structure. We are the teacher-writers who can empower our students to create within the structure.

### **What I would like to do next time:**

- Build choice into every assignment. Students should be able to analyze a character of their choice so that they own the assignment.

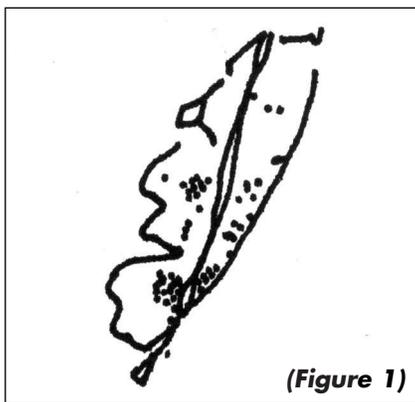
*(See Essay, continued on page 9)*

# Writing and Learning through Sketching

By Danan McNamara

“We’re going to the garden!” my students yell, as I walk out to the playground to pick them up after recess. They spot their yellow sketchbooks and blue sketch pencils in wicker baskets. Heading across the blacktop, past the equipment of caterpillar crawlers, swings, pirate ladders and more, we meet the soccer field and our garden is in sight just beyond the fence. Some walk and talk, others run and skip; 5,6,7,8 and 9-year-olds gather at the metal-checked fence to receive their sketching supplies. Once in hand, we all walk outside the school grounds down the path and into another world. Here they have planted seeds and starters and have done pest control by carefully looking through the leaves for other life to be moved, gently, to the empty lot next door.

It is within this space that they settle. Some on the sides of raised garden beds, others on paths of mulch. Still others nestle in dirt, exploring and getting close to what has captured their attention. It is a two-way street. Just as this aged leaf has captured Ben’s eye, Ben too has captured this leaf. Using his eye to guide his hand he creates the twisted stem, the jagged edges, the cracks and sprinkling of dirt. His

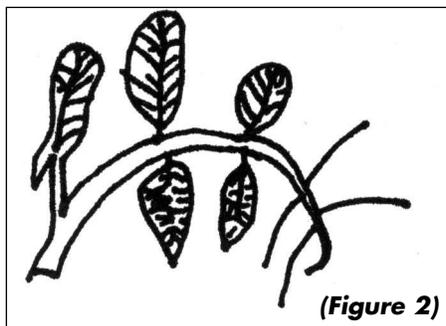


(Figure 1)

eye wanders and his hand follows. (See Figure 1).

“Do you know what I’m sketching?”

And to me, who sits beside this child, it is obvious. (See Figure 2).



(Figure 2)

“You’ve sketched the second vine. See? There’s the first, second and third leaf. You’ve sketched the second vine.”

“Yep! You’re right.”

“I could tell. You captured the curve, the leaves and the vines. It’s amazing!” I say.

“Contour drawing does that.”

“Does what?”

“It helps you see.”

I am a teacher researcher in a multi-age class of first, second, and third graders in a small coastal community in Southern California. I’ve found sketching supports the development of my students as writers. On the first day of school I introduce two sketching techniques to my students: blind contour and contour drawing. During a blind contour sketch your whole focus is on the object being drawn. You ignore your hand, which holds the pencil as well as the paper you are sketching upon. The premise of this exercise is to develop a relationship between your eyes and hand so that you can maintain your focus on what is being observed and capture it on paper. When I model this for my students, I invite them to think of an old ant, who walks very slowly with the help of a cane. As my

students imagine this old ant walking along their object, they are encouraged to go slow and capture what they see. They are to be the eyes of the ant. As a class, we talk about how our sketch might look like scribbles since we aren’t looking at our papers and that is okay because we are developing a relationship between our hand and eyes. During a contour sketch the focus is again on your object, but you may peek at your paper.

As a class, myself included, we sketch everyday. I feel it is important for my students to see me sketch because I want them to know that sketching is for everyone and that we are all learning. I schedule fifteen minutes daily for sketching, though depending on the dynamics of the day, we could have anywhere from five to fifteen minutes. Regardless of time, I expect my students’ whole focus to be on their sketch. It’s a quiet time. Having students go slowly and concentrate takes time to develop. For some it comes naturally; others pop up and say, “I’m finished.” My responses vary. “Look closer.” “See if you can go more slowly.” “Write down observations you’ve made so you don’t forget them.” They soon learn this is a time solely devoted to sketching, and like writing, one is never done. My students sit at round tables in groups of four. Before we move on to writing, we do a quick share of our sketch, sharing what we noticed with the others at our table. Having this time built in at the end is essential. The students welcome the opportunity to share their work and hear the ideas of their peers. This quick share provides an intimate setting to speak to a small group and practice listening. The students and I learn how each of us looks at the world differently, and by sharing, we are given the opportunity to see things in new and exciting ways.

The sketches and observations below were done by a third grader. Figure 3 (below) is a blind contour and Figure 4 (right) is a contour.

I find these sketches interesting because the results are so different. Despite the sketches, Chris made observations about his foot that on both occasions are unique and offer a place to begin writing as well as expand on ideas by asking "Why?" "Why does your foot look like piranhas and barracudas attacked it?" This in turn brings about greater details.

Daily sketching with tangible objects such as leaves, shells or other items that relate to our area of study provides my students with the opportunity to make detailed observations using their senses. Noticing the way something looks, feels, smells, tastes, and sounds is a natural invitation for children to make complex interpretations that become quite elaborate over the course of time. Sketching provides support for all my students, regardless of ability or age, including my second language learners. This was evident in my first grade student Max, an English language learner. Sketching taught him how to look closely and by learning to look, Max developed the ability to utilize his environment. Learning how to look through sketching and

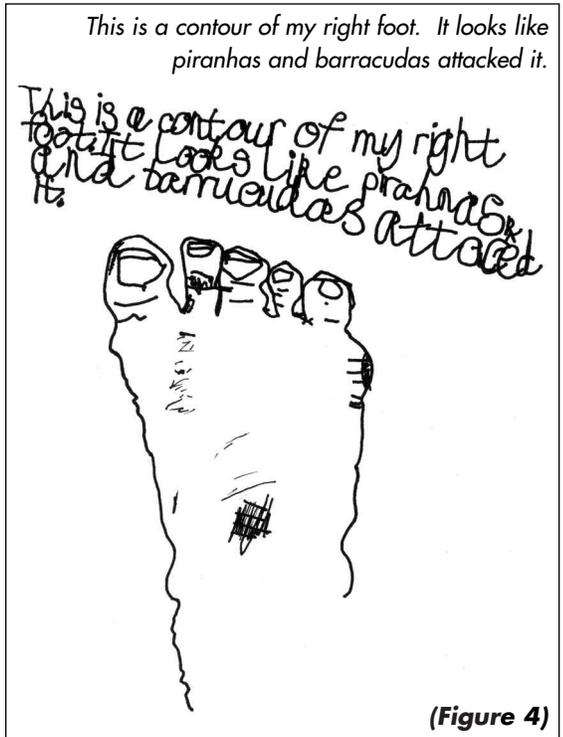
applying this technique of looking closely helped Max express himself more clearly in writing. If he or another student needed a word, Max would be able to find it in the room, be it in a song, poem or book. In addition, his vocabulary developed as children shared their ideas orally after sketching as well as during our daily author's chair. As others shared, Max was introduced to new words. This allowed him to familiarize himself with the English language and as a result, articulate his thinking more precisely.

I've found sketching to be like a new friend. At first you become acquainted. As you continue to meet and learn more about each other your relationship becomes richer. So too with sketching. Sketching allows the observer to become acquainted with an object. As children look closely at their objects they are creating background knowledge as well as broadening what they might say. This encourages them to speak in similes which can be complex and abstract. I support their similes by sharing with them rich literature relating to our studies from various authors such as Sandra Cisneros and Anne Morrow Lindbergh. When we began studying the lagoon and the associated wildlife, we sketched feathers. On one particular day a child wrote beside her sketch, "The feather reminds me of a piece of *Macrosistis Pirifira* or kelp" (The feather reminds me of a piece of *Macrcystis Pyrifera* or kelp). Looking at her blind contour sketch it is quite easy to see why she thought this. It looks like a strand of kelp with several floats and fronds. She made a connection to her previous learning that was insightful, relevant and demonstrated her understanding and knowledge.

Examples such as these show how sketching and writing allow students to connect learning to their lives in real ways. Another day while sketching feathers, Ben, a first grader found much to write about. He noted:

"It has mor then 22 dots" (It has more than 22 dots.) "It falls 1 foot in 10 secinds!" (It falls 1 foot in 10 seconds!) "It singes like a Boat." (It sinks like a boat.) "It camouflogees with the car pit" (It camouflages with the carpet.) "To of the dots looks like sun glases." (Two of the dots look like sunglasses.) "It looks goooood!" (It looks good!)

Ben made some very specific and rather scientific observations about this feather. He looked closely,



(Figure 4)

noticing dots and incorporating math by counting the number of dots he sees. He takes his observations further by using his knowledge of measurement and time to tell us how far and fast it can fall. As he was doing this he noticed how his feather fell, related it to a boat and wrote a simile. Upon landing, he observed how this feather 'camouflages' into our classroom carpet. Ben then proceeds to write another simile and an ending statement, evaluating his work, which captures not only his sketch and feather but also his writing and thinking.

The observations made by way of sketching become a starting point for my students' writing. In addition to being a starting point, sketching welcomes revisiting through multiple sketches of a single object. It is through this reacquaintance that observations

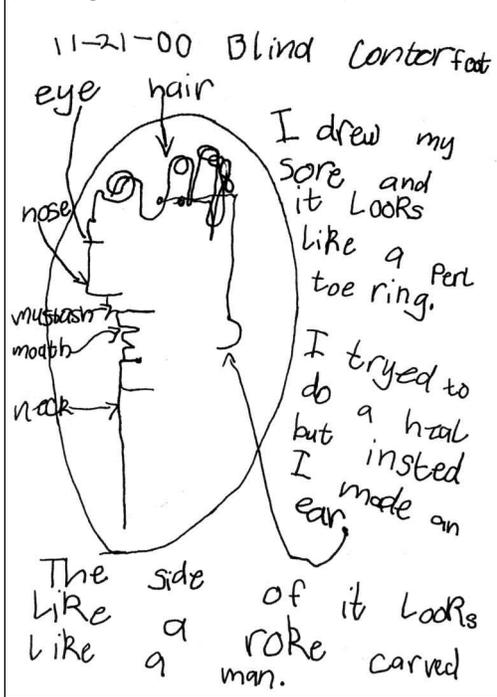
One part of my sketch looks like a snake's upper jaw. My real foot tastes and smells like rotten eggs.

One part of my sketch looks like a snake's upper jaw. My real foot tastes and smells like a rotten egg.



(Figure 3)

**(Example of Blind Contour)**



The feather is made like that so it can cover up the bird).

Carissa is taking her observations further by finding out how her object, a feather, functions like other objects: surfboards and leaves, those objects that remind her of her feather. This is a complex task. Her first statement, "A feather functions like a leaf because the feather protects the bird like a leaf protects the tree by shading the roots like a leaf boat," is so full. Her mind just seems to be overflowing with ideas and connections of which she is trying to make sense. She is relating a feather to a leaf then makes reference to a leaf boat! One might wonder, 'boat'? Yet her next sentence takes us to water: "The feather is like a surfboard because the surfboard can float and balance." Her third statement, "The feather is made like that so it can cover up the bird" isn't clearly related to the previous statement, but it goes without saying that she is trying to make sense of abstract relationships forming in her mind. Her observations about form and function regarding another feather she sketched are most clearly stated in her last three statements: "It also functions like a leaf because if you drop the feather it glides down, and if a leaf falls from a tree it glides down. The feather is like a surfboard because they are both sleek so it can glide through the air. The surfboard is sleek so it can glide through the water." I think this is due to her having been asked to stretch her thinking further by examining the relationship between form and function: Having thought about the relationships through writing, listening to others and sharing her thoughts. Writing tends to slow thinking down and commit ideas to paper. Therefore, we often learn more from writing.

Seeing the growth my students have made as writers, artists and thinkers from having incorporated sketching into our day has been exciting. Tyler summed it up well when she wrote that sketching helps her to think. If working with the concrete and sketching those observations helps children to think, then it will help them express themselves verbally and in writing. This in turn builds fluency and helps my students look at writing as

a process instead of a product.

I see sketching as the perfect metaphor for teacher research because they are both processes, processes of capturing close observations and asking myself, "What do I see?" Having these observations gives me records and anecdotal notes from throughout the year. They allow me the opportunity to go back and revisit learning. By having records to reread and reexamine, patterns emerge that I never noticed before and they can inform me of my students' understandings in new ways. My anecdotal records of my classroom, my students, and my teaching are resources to help guide me as I make observations, connections, and create questions that further promote inquiry and understanding for myself. Teacher research gives me the opportunity to 'sketch out' ideas so that I may be thoughtful about what I want my focus to be with regards to my teaching. I make decisions based on experiences as well as on the research of others. I've found through both sketching and teacher research that the more I practice, the more I see. These tools invite my students and me to look at the world in various ways: from the bottom, the top, the side, and the front, like Ben's sketch of his shoe. (Figure 5 above right). They are tools to help us think and learn.

For example, I once had a student, Rebecca, who began kindergarten

**I see sketching as the perfect metaphor for teacher research because they are both processes. Processes of capturing close observations and asking myself, "What do I see?"**

spelling only her name. She soon learned words such as 'cat' and

become intricate and detailed.

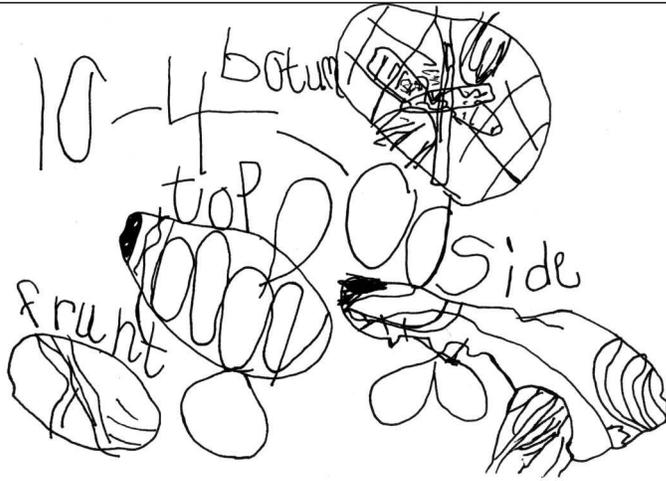
Carissa, a third grader wrote the following pieces:

*"It also functions like a leaf because if you drop the feather it glides down, and if a leaf falls from a tree it glides down. The feather is like a surfboard because they are both sleek so it can glide through the air. The surfboard is sleek so it can glide through the water." (It also functions like a leaf because if you drop the feather it glides down, and if a leaf falls from a tree it glides down. The feather is like a surfboard because they are both sleek so it can glide through the air. The surfboard is sleek so it can glide through the water).*

While sketching another feather she wrote:

*"A feather functions like a leaf because the feather protects the bird like a leaf protects the tree by shading the roots like a leaf boat. The feather is like a surfboard because the surfboard can float and balance. The feather is made like that so it can cover up the bird." (A feather functions like a leaf because the feather protects the bird like a leaf protects the tree by shading the roots like a leaf boat. The feather is like a surfboard because the surfboard can float and balance.*

(Figure 5)



'mom.' She incorporated these CVC (consonant, vowel, consonant) words into her writing but at the same time squiggle writing or syllabic hypotheses (Martens 1996) also represented writing to her. Syllabic hypothesis were her stories, and they were longer in length. When I revisited her writing samples and xeroxed copies from her notebook, I literally laid them chronologically on the floor in front of me. It was then that I noticed that

## Sketching and teacher research are the tools to help me accomplish my goals, so that my students and I may keep on wandering and wondering.

every syllabic hypothesis story she wrote began with an 'R' and a 'b', the first and third letters of her first name. In addition to these letters, I observed she knew directionality. Her words and squiggles moved left to right and from the top to the bottom of the page. Her use of capital and lower case letters also gave me insight to her understanding of the use of these letters. These anecdotal notes and findings supported me as I read professional literature regarding young children's development and how children at her age and literacy development often use letters of their name or other important words when learning

how to write using conventional letters. As I read, I connected personal observations of my students' learning with the authors' work. This in turn helped me educate my students' parents about their child's learning and development.

While sketching in the garden one day, a child asked for an eraser. Yoko responded, saying the child didn't need an eraser and then added, "That's what's great about sketching; you can turn mistakes into something you like." Teacher research and sketching are resources for my students and me. The more I see, the more resources I have so that I may, as Yoko stated, 'turn mistakes into something (I) like' and create a learning environment in which all my students can thrive. It is my desire for my students and myself to be life long learners. As Eve Merriam wrote in 1991 "...to be curious—to take the time to look closely, to use all (our) senses to see and touch and taste and smell and hear. To keep on wandering and wondering." Sketching and teacher research are the tools to help me accomplish my goals, so that my students and I may keep on wandering and wondering.

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- Continue to meet all levels of writing ability by encouraging writers who are ready to practice a variety of formats in their writing. Work with students to change the organizer, relocate the thesis statement, write paragraphs with the topic sentence at the end of the paragraph (one student did that instinctively for impact in one essay).
- Emphasize communicating with the audience. Can I provide an audience other than just myself? Magic happens when writers write for others. I will have to work on that. Perhaps a class exchange.
- Be more diligent in collection of student samples. Better yet, bring the students in on the research, letting them compare their papers. As a class, or as individuals, we can decide what steps need to be taken next.

Reflecting on my students' writing journey makes me realize that I should have made more changes and should have documented them more explicitly. Yet I also understand that my quest during this year yielded as much information about my teaching as it did about my students' writing. Realizing what I should have done has been part of my discovery.

Teaching writing has always been a challenge filled with dilemmas and decisions. My students' writing helped me understand one of those dilemmas; it is not the organizer, the structure, or the form that is a problem in the teaching of the essay. A problem arises when teachers fail to use the form as a starting point, letting go just as soon as possible so that the essay is defined by style and content, not the organization. Beginning riders use safety wheels and then ride with daring confidence after they have practiced; ballerinas learn basic positions and then dance with grace. Mozart wrote his symphony, abiding by certain rules of form. So Shakespeare wrote his sonnets. Our students will develop their unique writing styles if we teach them as they practice and encourage them to let go!



# An Authentic Approach to Teacher Research: The Library of our Dreams

By Carolyn Esposito

A local issue, Proposition L, would be the only item on the upcoming March 2nd ballot. If passed, it would allow taxes to be allocated for all public libraries in our county. Within the context of current events, our multiage class of first, second, and third graders briefly discussed the pros and cons of Proposition L. Prior knowledge concerning the concept of libraries gave the kids a special interest in the topic. The enthusiasm and interests of the children prompted me to determine that objectives for a unit including “good citizenship” would relate to the Proposition L issue. Completing ten components of the “Library of Our Dreams Portfolio” (Example B) within small collaborative groups would be our goal. It was my hope that the art component would encourage students to take an active interest in all other aspects of the portfolio, thereby allowing us to integrate the California State Standards of History/Social Science, Language Arts, and Fine Arts.

Things started to fall into place when I discovered that March 2nd was significant in several ways. The library aide and I were coordinating the *Read Across America* reading event at our school, which would take place that day and evening. In addition, the polls would be at our school with voters coming and going throughout the day as they voted on Proposition L. Finally, it was on this day that my students were scheduled to have their “Library of Our Dreams” projects completed. I felt confident that the topic of “libraries” would not only be interesting and engaging to all of my students, but would also provide an authentic approach to the topic of good citizenship as proposed in the History/Social Science California State Board Adopted Standards for first, second, and third grades.

To begin the “Library of Our Dreams” project, the class and I discussed how the portfolio goals

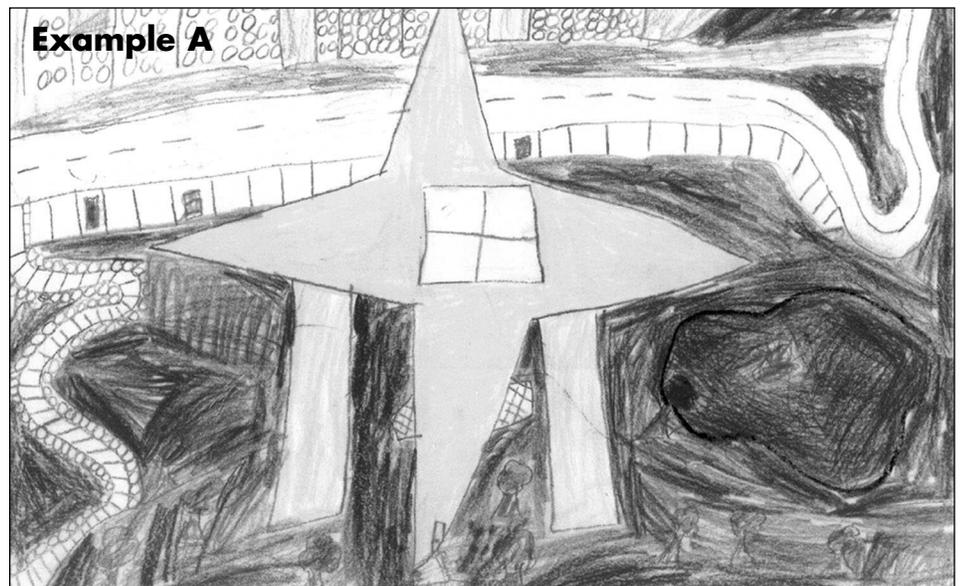
would be completed in the next two weeks. We labeled our calendar with important days and due dates. The kids were especially looking forward to the *Read Across America* event which would be our culminating activity. We were anxious to get started and began the process of choosing our four collaborative groups.

After randomly selecting students from our “name bag,” we had four groups with five students in each who would work together to complete the portfolio requirements. Within each group, students with differing maturity, ability, and interest levels created what appeared to be an optimal climate for consensus-building activities.

However, as children’s names were selected from the bag, it quickly became obvious that one of the groups might be especially unbalanced in regards to personalities and ability levels. My concerns were well-founded and confirmed during the first activity. Each group would have forty minutes to brainstorm their “dream” library, make word maps, and prepare to present their ideas in a class discussion. After more than an hour, one of the groups was still struggling to put

ideas down on paper.

This was Group One, which quickly became the focus of my attention. Anthony is a third grader with low/average reading skills who can sometimes be very strong-willed and moody. He is on medication to control his anger, but around 1:00 P.M., the class often notices a change in his personality, as he quite suddenly becomes mean and belligerent. Austin, a first grader, is a perfectionist with below average reading and language skills which often triggers the “I-can’t-do-anything-right” mode for him. Dale, also a third grader, has very high reading skills but struggles with second grade spelling abilities. He has an easy-going personality and often follows the lead of Anthony regarding mischievous behavior. Justin is a quiet second grader who is considered to be a “special needs” (learning disabled) child and gets additional assistance from the Special Education teacher. His skill level in all subjects is early first grade. Rachel is an average first grader and the only girl in the group. She seemed to feel out of place without her friends (girls), as she remained the only non-verbal student whenever the group was together.



During the class discussion, we discovered that there was a good reason Group One was having difficulty with the task of brainstorming and planning—there was little (if any) consensus between the five members. The three other groups shared with them how they were already developing camaraderie by listening to and respecting each other's ideas. The students in Group One acknowledged that they needed to make more of an effort to achieve agreement amongst themselves so that they could finish the project and meet the goals of the State Standards including: *Discuss the importance of public virtue and the role of citizens, including how to participate in a classroom, community and in civic life.*

Example A (lower left) shows the finished drawing of Group One's

dream library. The overall design of the library was consensual; however, getting the artwork completed collaboratively was challenging. For example, when Anthony and Dale were called to a math group one day, they told Justin, Austin, and Rachel what to do while they were gone. There was still rarely a discussion amongst them to determine group responsibilities. Anthony was still the "boss." While Anthony and Dale were gone, Justin busily colored everything green. Austin, as was usual for him, worked on his own library design (he still didn't understand the concept of group effort), and Rachel drew trees. When Anthony and Dale returned to the group, an argument ensued as Anthony began to yell at Justin for coloring the pond green when it was supposed to be blue. Justin stated that he didn't know that the shape

**It was about this time that I had thoughts of aborting the entire project. In addition to the consensus issues, I was questioning whether all of my students would be capable of completing the ten components of the portfolio.**

was a pond and that he could fix it by coloring over the green with blue. Dale curtly told Austin that his design couldn't be used since the group already had one they were using. Austin had put a lot of effort into his drawing and was on the verge of tears. Rachel stood by quietly and watched. It was time for yet another class discussion concerning what we had discovered about the concepts of *respect for the rights and opinions of others, direct democracy, and resolution of problems* (California State Standards).

It was about this time that I had thoughts of aborting the entire project. In addition to the consensus issues, I was questioning whether all of my students would be capable of completing the ten components of the portfolio (Example B, left). The requirements seemed overwhelming and difficult for several students—especially the first graders and special needs kids. In addition, I found it challenging to find appropriate instructional resources which would support the investigations and research of the kids. Our school librarian, county librarian, and city librarian found useful information on the Internet, but it seems that few child-friendly books have been written on the topic of *Library History*. I felt unprepared and discouraged.

An even bigger concern was the fact that I was seeing very little creativity being used in all four of the groups. I had assumed that the children would have many original and

## Example B

### Library of our Dreams Portfolio

names \_\_\_\_\_

(You will be working with 5 friends.)

Please make sure that you include the following in your portfolio:

1. In writing, tell about the history of libraries. You might find this information at the library or on the internet.
2. With your group, brainstorm: "The Library of our Dreams."
3. With your group, write an essay called, "The Library of our Dreams."
4. With your group, make a drawing of your dream library (inside and out).
5. With your group, design a logo for your dream library.
6. With your group, build a model of your dream library.
7. For your homework journal, write: "If I were a book in the library..."
8. For homework, each group member will interview 3 adults and ask of each, "If you could design a library, what would you include?"
9. In writing, describe how items will be checked out of your dream library.
10. Be ready to debate students in the class about the issue of Proposition L.

We'll be presenting our portfolios to the class between .

Have fun!

Mrs. Esposito ☺



inventive plans for their dream libraries. Instead, their reports seemed flat and uninteresting. I decided to check once again on prior knowledge and asked the kids if they had ever actually visited a public library. To my surprise, only four of my students had been to a library other than the one at school.

The more I thought about this phenomenon, the more sense it made. Our district has one of the county's smallest populations with only 375 students (pre-twelfth grade). However, our district also encompasses the largest square mile area in our county. Basically, we're located in the middle of nowhere. We are surrounded by beautiful meadows and mountains...but no libraries. The closest grocery store is fifteen miles from the school. The nearest public libraries are at least a forty mile drive on mountain roads in any direction.

It was this realization that helped me determine that the library project would be even more important than I had previously thought. To build in some prior knowledge (my quota for field trips had already been used), I showed the video entitled Page Master which is a story about a little boy trapped for a night inside a library. It seemed to do the trick. Lively class discussions ensued and creative ideas began to flow. Now, our dream libraries had zebra striped walls, roller coasters, lofts for kids to spend the night in, golden castles, and rockets that blast readers into space. Thankfully, we were off to a new start.

Although I often intervened with guidance and direction, Group One eventually began to interact collaboratively on their own. Everything seemed to come together when they began to take ownership in their art project. Classmates made ongoing comments such as, "Cool, I wish ours looked so good," or "How'd you do that?" Newly attained confidence encouraged Group One to believe that not only would they finish on time, but that they might even be "the best" (according to Anthony). Although their personalities continued to sometimes get in the way of a true consensual working environment, they always seemed to work out their differences in a way in which all members of the group felt validated and respected. Along with the rest of the class, Group One finished the Library of our Dreams project while practicing the targeted California State Standards skills of listening, negotiating, and compromising. An authentic approach to meeting State Standards along with ongoing reflection and inquiry provided the means for all students to meet success.

At Open House, the library projects were on display in the classroom and all parents came to honor the accomplishments of their children. As I watched the kids sharing their portfolios and detailed models with their families and friends, I was impressed by the knowledge and confidence that they had gained as they attained their goals.

Finally, March 2nd arrived. The kids eagerly presented their projects to their classmates, debated the pros and cons of Proposition L issues, visited the polls, and "voted." In the evening, our school cafeteria was filled with kids in pajamas reading Dr. Seuss stories with their families and community members. *Read Across America* night had turned out to be the biggest literacy event in our school's history—what better way to end our study of libraries and good citizenship.

*A final note: Although the children were certain that Proposition L would pass, it did not receive approval of the voters.*



# MUSE BOX

## Things I Learned Last Week

—William Stafford

Ants, when they meet each other,  
usually pass on the right.

Sometimes you can open a sticky  
door with your elbow.

A man in Boston has dedicated himself  
to telling about injustice.  
For three thousand dollars he will  
come to your town and tell you about it.

Schopenhauer was a pessimist but  
he played the flute.

Yeats, Pound, and Eliot saw art as  
growing from other art. They studied that.

If I ever die, I'd like it to be  
in the evening. That way, I'll have  
all the dark to go with me, and no one  
will see how I begin to hobble along.

In the Pentagon one person's job is to  
take pins out of towns, hills, and fields,  
and then save the pins for later.

.....

*What have you learned from your students this week? What have you learned about teaching this week? Observe. Listen. Question. Scribble notes. See yourself, your teaching and your students as a living laboratory. Allow yourself the time to probe pressing questions, and commit yourself to write about the dynamics within the walls of your classroom.*

# ESTABLISHING A CULTURE OF INQUIRY TO IMPROVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

KATHLEEN L. GALLAGHER  
AND KATHRYN J. FORD

*“The growth of any craft depends on shared dialogue and honest dialogue among the people who do it. We grow by private trial and error to be sure—but our willingness to try, and fail, as individuals is severely limited when we are not supported by a community that encourages such risks.”*

—Parker Palmer

“If I just had time to read.”

“If I just had time to study my curriculum.”

“If I just had time to collaborate with my colleagues.”

“If I just had time to analyze the work my students do and plan accordingly.”

“Then maybe I’d feel like an effective and competent teacher.”

Lack of time seems to be the universal inhibitor of professional development among teachers. As teachers we have become accustomed to teaching all day with little breaks here and there for lunch or “prep.” But where in our day do we have time to get better at teaching? The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) acknowledges that teachers have a genuine need for more time to grow in their knowledge of teaching. The NSDC Board of Trustees recommends that school systems dedicate at least 25% of an educator’s work time to learning and collaborating with colleagues. According to a survey of members, no districts have yet reached that level of commitment (*Journal of Staff Development*, 2001). So when we learned of our district’s plan for raising student achievement at its

lowest performing schools by investing in professional time for its teachers, we became very interested.

Our district used the Academic Performance Index (API) to identify eight “focus” schools where student achievement was in crisis. Each of these schools obtained an API score of 1 on a nine-point scale based on the Stanford Achievement Test, 9th ed. Due to an important partnership between Qualcomm (a local hi-tech company), San Diego State University, and San Diego City Schools, teachers have been given time to increase their professional knowledge and their instructional practice. Qualcomm provides funding for the hiring and training of Math Specialists at each of the

## AS TEACHERS WE HAVE BECOME ACCUSTOMED TO TEACHING ALL DAY WITH LITTLE BREAKS HERE AND THERE FOR LUNCH OR “PREP.” BUT WHERE IN OUR DAY DO WE HAVE TIME TO GET BETTER AT TEACHING?

Focus Schools who are responsible for raising student achievement in mathematics. These teachers have a limited teaching focus and ninety minutes of professional development each day. Training consists of a sequence of classes at San Diego State University, culminating in a Math Specialist’s Certificate. Instead of teaching mathematics, classroom teachers are given ninety minutes per day to work in collaboration with colleagues to improve student achievement in Language Arts.

Our site is an urban school in San Diego. Eighty-five percent of the student population is Latino and 100% of students receive free lunch. It was designated as a Focus School in 2000. In addition, the California State Department of Education had recently placed the school in corrective action. The school has been given three years to show improvement, or sanctions will be imposed on the school by the state. These facts have propelled the site leadership, in conjunction with the district, to seek out innovative strategies for involving teachers in the improvement process.

### CHALLENGE

How could we, as staff developers/teacher researchers ensure the success of this unusual gift of time? How could we help support teachers as they strive to improve their teaching? We felt an overwhelming obligation to make sure this time had a positive effect on children’s learning. Professional development became a cause worthy of our own time and study. Because of our involvement with the San Diego Area Writing Project’s (SDAWP) teacher research group and our status as a partnership school with the University of California at San Diego, we were able to receive guid-

ance and support. The concerns we had about teachers using the time productively became the questions that would guide our teacher research. We were curious to find out if the teacher research model for improving classroom practice could be applied to our work as staff developers to help us evaluate and improve the work we do with teachers.

The SDAWP teacher research group, of which we are a part, is made up of teachers from schools all over the

county who voluntarily give up a Saturday once a month to study their teaching practice. As members, we are always asking each other questions. We talk about or debate professional texts, sharing our opinions of and reactions to the author's ideas. As a group we reflect and write about our practice for professional journals. We study our own writing and edit each other's writing. These activities help us clarify the way we think about teaching. We are involved in staff development, providing training for other teachers. We are pushing ourselves to make informed decisions about what is best for our students based on careful analysis of the critical observations made and other data obtained from our classrooms. We have created a culture of inquiry, a safe place to discuss, analyze, and improve our teaching.

Our question was: How could we help teachers at our school come together to create a culture of inquiry similar to the one we experience in our research group? Our district had designated this time for professional development in collaboration with colleagues. District leaders wanted teachers to use the time to study and refine the craft of teaching. How to reorganize professional development and, in the process, redefine what it means to be a teacher became our guiding question. What do really good teachers do, and what support exists that

## OUR QUESTION WAS: HOW COULD WE HELP TEACHERS AT OUR SCHOOL COME TOGETHER TO CREATE A CULTURE OF INQUIRY SIMILAR TO THE ONE WE EXPERIENCE IN OUR RESEARCH GROUP?

allow them to do it? We looked carefully at the teachers in our own research group and as we brainstormed these traits, we began to realize that we were listing the behaviors of teacher researchers:

- Taking initiative for their own learning
- Thoughtfully examining their practice
- Engaging in ongoing professional reading
- Collaborating with colleagues

- Intensively observing students to inform instructional decisions
- Questioning within a broader community of educators
- Documenting progress
- Sharing findings

Facilitating these traits in the teachers at our school became the focus of our work. Supporting the process of teacher research as professional development gave us an opportunity to explore the connections between what it means to be a good teacher and how good teaching traits can be applied to models for staff development.

### FIRST STEPS

The program was off and running in September, before we even had a chance to define our purpose. The district provided the time. Math Specialists began teaching the second week of school, and suddenly fourth and fifth grade teachers with varying levels of teaching experience were released from their classrooms to collaborate on improving teaching. The teachers knew that this release time was for professional development, distinct from classroom preparation time. They met in the newly developed Teaching and Learning Support Center (TLSC) at our school. This room housed a professional library, a wealth of children's literature across content areas, leveled guiding reading books in both English

and Spanish, supplies, work space for collaborative groups, and two staff developers whose primary responsibility was improving teaching and learning at the site. Teachers could not grade papers. They couldn't make phone calls or take care of personal business. The work they did during this time had to be focused on improving their instructional practice.

As staff developers/researchers, our

goal was to assist teachers in using this time for their own learning. But each teacher involved had his or her own ideas about what that meant and forced participation created obstacles throughout the year that we continue to struggle with today. The time we (the writers) spend as teacher researchers is a cherished aspect of our professional lives that we choose to participate in outside of our regular teaching jobs. For us, it was like a dream come true to be given time during our teaching day to work and talk with colleagues about teaching and learning. But at the beginning of the year, few of the fourth and fifth grade teachers realized that this opportunity was something special. The teachers didn't ask for this time. They didn't write a grant for it. It was given to them simply because they happened to teach grades four and five in a Focus School.

The structure of the time evolved as the school year progressed. As we began discussions concerning the use of this time, teachers began to realize that something needed to happen in terms of student achievement. As a peer coach/staff developer, Kathy met with them daily most of the first week. They reviewed books from the professional library and went through Heinemann and Stenhouse catalogues to select books to be used for study. Each session began with collaborative written reflection in a group notebook about their teaching. This gave them an opportunity to share what was happening in their classrooms. This led to discussion and reading focused on their immediate needs as teachers. At the end of each session they collaborated to write a sentence or two describing their plans for the next day.

As Kathy began to leave the groups on their own in order to coach other teachers in the school, they began to operate at varying levels of productiveness. All teachers were provided the book, *Guiding Readers and Writers: Grades 3-6, Teaching Comprehension, Genre, and Content Literacy* by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell. Collaborative groups started to read the book during their professional development time, but each group functioned dif-

ferently depending on who was involved. In one of the groups, the participants looked from a distance as if they were studying their practice. But it was clear upon looking closely that they were reading because they were being told to read, not because they believed it could solve the problems they faced in the classroom. They appreciated being given the time but didn't necessarily buy into the framework for

**BUT IT WAS CLEAR UPON LOOKING CLOSELY THAT THEY WERE READING BECAUSE THEY WERE BEING TOLD TO READ, NOT BECAUSE THEY BELIEVED IT COULD SOLVE THE PROBLEMS THEY FACED IN THE CLASSROOM.**

instruction the school and the district was expecting them to teach by. They seemed resentful toward the process because they sensed a district lack of trust in their professional ability both in math and in literacy. They often spent time complaining about school or district issues unrelated to the work they were doing in their classrooms, so their discussions seldom focused on students or themselves as teachers. Their reflections began to sound contrived, like work we receive from students when they haven't fully understood the relevance of an assignment. Their writing lacked personal voice and commitment. These teachers weren't studying because they wanted to. They were doing it because they had no other choice.

The second group was more dynamic. The teachers were very different from one another, varying both in experience and philosophy. When one person would get distracted and start talking about movies or their plans for the weekend, the others would almost forcefully bring them back on track. Sometimes they spent so much time arguing or joking around about what they were doing that by the time they found a meaningful direction, their time was gone. When they did read the book and share their thoughts and frustrations about trying to implement the ideas in their own classrooms, they each would report about what

they did, feeling pretty confident that their way was the best way for them. Their discussions seemed more competitive than collaborative, each trying to show that they were doing it the right way.

The personalities of the teachers in the third group seemed to complement each other and they were able to begin reading and discussing the book as it related to the work they

were doing in their classrooms. They each appreciated hearing each other's opinions and interpretations of the text. As time went on, they began to use the book more as a tool for research. Their reflections would lead to discussions concerning immediate problems they were facing in their classrooms. They began thumbing through the table of contents and indices to locate specific information about particu-

**AS TIME WENT ON, THEY BEGAN TO USE THE BOOK MORE AS A TOOL FOR RESEARCH. THEIR REFLECTIONS WOULD LEAD TO DISCUSSIONS CONCERNING IMMEDIATE PROBLEMS THEY WERE FACING IN THEIR CLASSROOMS.**

lar issues. They brainstormed ideas and made plans to try them out in their classrooms. They moved on their own to the professional library, consulting other books having to do with the same topic. They tried and re-tried their ideas until they found success, and their reflections and discussions led them to more questions, which they investigated together. They were beginning to act like teacher researchers.

So how could we facilitate all teachers becoming this involved in the analysis of their craft? Here's where

the real work began. One explanation for our lack of success with teachers might be that from the beginning we had not been very explicit about our own goals as staff developers/researchers. We needed to clearly articulate our purpose and goals so teachers understood the reasoning behind our decisions. We came up with the following purpose statement and shared it with teachers. We believe that when teachers have opportunities to:

- READ professionally to INFORM instruction,
- COLLABORATE professionally to PLAN instruction,
- SHARE student work to ANALYZE instruction, and
- DISCUSS strategies to IMPROVE instruction

cultures of inquiry are established which lead to improved teaching and learning.

**LEARNING FROM TEACHERS**

During the next week, we met with each collaborative, sharing our vision. Teachers seemed to buy into the vision but it didn't seem to manifest in their practice. Many teachers continued to be unproductive.

We suggested a schedule in hopes they would manage their time more effectively:

- Reflection 10 minutes
- Professional Reading 20 minutes
- Discussion 20 minutes
- Student Work Analysis 20 minutes
- Response 10 minutes
- Next Steps 10 minutes

In hindsight it is clear to us that this action was inappropriate, especially considering the environment for learning we were trying to create. We learned immediately that dictating the structure was a mistake because immediate rebellion ensued. Here we were espousing the importance of ownership and collaboration, and, in the same breath, telling teachers to do it our way. A few teachers addressed the added structure with an open mind, trusting in the process, thankful there was some format to adhere to. These happened to be the same teachers who were progressing as teacher researchers prior to the intervention. But most resented being told what to do. This led to more discussion and eventually each group worked out a schedule on their own that they agreed to follow.

Teachers needed to maintain control over the professional growth they accomplished. They needed to be the ones to decide what to do and how to do it. In the overall scheme of things, dictating the schedule was actually helpful because it made teachers realize that they didn't want to be told what to do. We observed the groups the day after the schedule was introduced and heard one teacher encourage his group, "Let's figure out how we're going to use this time, or they're going to just tell us to do it their way." Most of the work plans ended up containing the components we had defined. They all included time for reflection, reading, discussion, and writing. The time remained flexible so that groups could allow their individual needs to drive the process.

But authenticity still seemed lacking. Although teachers were beginning to work together and talk about teaching, they weren't referring to the work their students were doing. Teachers viewed looking at student work and grading papers as one in the same. Since grading papers was not allowed during this time, few teachers ever brought student work to their meetings. There was little evidence from the classroom that their teaching was causing students to learn better. This observation caused a discussion with all of the teachers about the difference between grading papers

and analyzing student work. We can't make informed decisions about instruction unless we look closely at what students have done in response to previous instruction. Integrating the analysis of student work guides us in deciding our next steps to take in the classroom.

## LEARNING FROM STUDENTS

It was at this point, in December, that we decided to formally introduce teachers to the process of teacher research. We knew that teacher research was a powerful model for improving instruction because we have engaged in it ourselves and seen first-hand the results of the intense study of chil-

dren. We used the words "Action Research" and defined it as a process in which participants examine their own educational practice, systematically and carefully, using the techniques of research (Watts, H., 1985). "Action research is a recursive ongoing process of systematic study in which teachers examine their own teaching and student's learning through descriptive reporting, purposeful conversation, collegial sharing, and critical reflection for the purpose of improving classroom practice" (Miller & Pine, 1990).

In this new phase of the professional development time, each teacher chose three students from their class representative of a specific type of learner. By studying three students in depth, teachers would become more aware of the effects of the instructional strategies they were implementing.

One teacher mentioned that he realized during a conference he had with a student that he might have misinterpreted the progress of one of his students. She was a stu-

dent who always did as she was told. In his study, she represented the quiet students who often squeak through the system unnoticed. In his classroom, he was experimenting with the use of different questions to encourage more talk from students. Although the student's oral reading was almost perfect, their conversation revealed her struggle with comprehension. Instead of discussing the actual text, this student was making up a story she thought it might be about. Apparently she was using the pictures in the text to guide her speaking, but since the book was non-fiction, her story didn't make sense. According to her DRA (Developmental Reading Assessment) she had increased from level 8 to 18 (a year's growth in six

## HERE WE WERE ESPOUSING THE IMPORTANCE OF OWNERSHIP AND COLLABORATION, AND IN THE SAME BREATH TELLING TEACHERS TO DO IT OUR WAY.

months), but this conversation made him question whether that was truly the case. And if he was wrong about this student, how many others might he have misjudged? He began to deepen his focus on conferring to make sure his assessments were truly indicative of his students' abilities. These questions allowed him to connect deeply to each of the students as he conferred. At the end of the year he wrote:

"Having 90 minutes every day to study and collaborate and do the things I never used to have time to do was great. All of the documentation DRA, WPI (Writing Proficiency Inventory), anecdotal notes on conferences and my own reflections made doing report cards so much easier—a lot better than a grade book that doesn't really give me or parents any information. Before this year, I never had the sense of what a really strong, balanced literacy program looked like."

This teacher felt like he knew each one of his students not only as read-

## —Online Resources for Teacher Research—

### *NETWORKS: AN ON-LINE JOURNAL FOR TEACHER RESEARCH*

<http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/~ctd/networks/>

“This is the first on-line journal dedicated to teacher research. With the help of readers and writers like you, this journal aims to provide a forum for teachers' voices, a place where teachers working in classrooms, from pre-school to university, can share their experiences and learn from each other.... In each issue, you will find feature-length articles, as well as short reports of work-in-progress, book reviews, and discussions on current issues in teacher research.”

### *TEACHER RESEARCH* (George Mason University)

<http://gse.gmu.edu/research/tr/>

A site maintained by George Mason University listing resources and background information for teachers interested in using research practices in their classrooms. Information includes: teacher research projects, research about teacher research, and current issues in teacher research.

### *ACTION RESEARCH ARTICLES ONLINE* (University of Colorado at Denver)

[http://carbon.cudenver.edu/~mryder/itc\\_data/act\\_res.html](http://carbon.cudenver.edu/~mryder/itc_data/act_res.html)

“This is a resource site for teachers who are interested in conducting research about teaching and learning, both formal (more traditional) research and informal action research. It is also the information site for three North Central Indiana teacher-researcher initiatives.”

### *RESOURCES FOR TEACHER-RESEARCHERS* (Indiana University South Bend)

[http://www.iusb.edu/~gmetteta/Research\\_about\\_Teaching\\_and.htm](http://www.iusb.edu/~gmetteta/Research_about_Teaching_and.htm)

A website with research resource and tips for conducting classroom research.

### *LOOKING AT STUDENT WORK*

<http://www.lasw.org/>

This web site represents an association of individuals and educational organizations that focus on looking at student work to strengthen connections between instruction, curriculum, and other aspects of school life to students' learning. The site is offered as a resource for teachers, administrators, staff developers, and others who work with teachers, schools, and students. Looking at Student Work provides ideas and resources about a set of practices we term "looking at student work."

### *CRESS TEACHER RESEARCH PROGRAM* (UC Davis)

<http://education.ucdavis.edu/cress/projects/teachresearch.html>

The CRESS teacher research program offers year-long seminars for teachers interested in conducting systematic research in their own classrooms or schools. Now in its twelfth year, the program supports a regional network of teacher research groups. Each group is facilitated by an experienced teacher researcher, and, taken together, the groups support teachers of all grade levels and from all disciplines.

### *EDUCATING AS INQUIRY – A TEACHER ACTION RESEARCH SITE*

<http://www.lupinworks.com/ar/index.html>

Developed by Dr. Judith M. Newman. Links to journals, articles, courses.

### *CARNEGIE FOUNDATION – CASTL PROGRAM*

<http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/CASTL/k-12/index.htm>

The program, which began in 1999, includes a national fellowship project that brings together outstanding K-12 teachers as Carnegie Scholars. These scholars are committed to documenting their teaching and to sharing their work with others.

### *NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT*

<http://www.writingproject.org/Resources/trweb.htm>

A selection of informative, user-friendly web sites dedicated to practitioner research.

ers, but as people. By focusing on the actual work his students did, he was able to decide first if the work had truly been worth doing, second, did the work demonstrate understanding of what he had taught, and third, what instructional goals should he focus on next for students. The deep analysis of the three students in his Action Research allowed him to look at other student work more intensely. He formed his guided reading groups and developed lessons that allowed him to support their reading development.

At the end of the year we asked the teachers how they thought their learning affected the progress their students made. They all agreed that they never would have read the books they read this year without being given the time to do so. “There’s no way I ever would have gotten this much reading done at home,” added one mother of triplets, with her fourth child on the way. “And collaboration made us accountable for the reading. Plus, we learned not only from the authors, but from each other as well.” In addition, they all commented on the ability of their students to identify what they were learning. They all agreed that as teachers they had learned to be more concrete about their purpose and to make sure their students understood what they were doing and why they were doing it. The third group added that, “The quality of student work is better. Students can read fiction and non-fiction. They understand different genres, purposes for reading and structures of texts. Students didn’t realize before that reading meant understanding. They had never felt what that felt like.”

## NEXT STEPS

Teacher research is a recursive process. Groups and individuals will move through the cycle at different rates depending on their area of study. Our job continues to be facilitation of the process among teachers. All teachers agreed that their research seemed important when the administration asked questions about it. When we joined their groups and interviewed them about their progress they asked whether it would be possible for

“these kinds of meetings” to happen more often. We were reminded that our research also has more meaning because we are accountable to the broader community of our own research group.

Finding an interested audience and space for teachers to share their work will be an important next step for us. Teachers need to be acknowledged for the work they are doing, and we can never really know what they understand unless they tell us. But we don't write just

leagues had on your teaching this year? What evidence have you collected from your classroom that demonstrates the effect of your teaching on children's learning? How have you changed as a teacher this year? Districts might publish some of the insights of teachers in a district newsletter or professional development journal. They might consider whether teachers are presenting at conferences or submitting their professional writing for publication. They will find that just looking for these characteristics

increased our commitment to quality work. Being accountable to the known and unknown professionals who care about education and teaching was the guiding force that empowered us to do our best.

Our district's mission is to increase student achievement by supporting teaching and learning in the classroom. In *The Kind of Schools We Need* (1998), Eliot Eisner reflects on two levels of ignorance. Primary ignorance is when you do not know something, but you know that you do not know it so you can do something about it. Secondary ignorance is when you do not know something, but you do not know that you don't know it, and thus can do nothing about it. The goal of our work has been to establish a culture in which primary ignorance is revered as a genuine and valued stage in the learning process. Another goal has been to avoid secondary ignorance through ongoing reading, intense study, and the rigorous use of data. By giving teachers time to research their practice, the district is demonstrating its faith in teachers' abilities to figure out for themselves what they do not know and to do something about it with the support of colleagues who struggle with similar issues. It is our deep desire that teachers will rise to the occasion, establishing cultures of inquiry that assist them in creating environments where all students can learn.

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## OUR MOST IMPORTANT REALIZATION IS THAT ANALYSIS FEEDS THE IMPROVEMENT PROCESS, NOT JUST FOR TEACHERS, BUT FOR EVERYONE. PAYING ATTENTION TO THE EFFECTS OF OUR ACTIONS INFORMS FUTURE ACTION.

to display understanding. "Writing teaches. The process of composing our thoughts moves us away from the muddle of isolated facts toward the order of integrated knowledge. That's usually called understanding" (*NEA, Today*, 1983). Like reading, unless we build writing into professional development, it will rarely happen. When teachers are given time to think and reason about what they are doing—integrating new knowledge with what they already understand—they are able to present it strategically to students so they in turn can make sense of it.

At the beginning of this study we were interested in finding out if teacher research could also be utilized as a framework for evaluating and improving our own work with teachers. Supporting teachers' involvement in teacher research changes the role of the staff developer. If the goal is that teachers take ownership of the process, then staff developers and their superiors might need to consider alternative methods for evaluating the effectiveness of teachers. In addition to classroom observations, they might ask teachers questions like: How is your professional reading affecting your decision making in the classroom? What impact have your col-

will cause them to surface in some teachers, raising the bar for all teachers.

It is true however, that all teachers are not interested in this level of professional action and discourse. Forced participation in the process seems counter-productive. But since professional development plays such a significant role in the improvement of teaching, it is imperative that all teachers participate at some level. Offering teachers choices could significantly impact their attitude and level of involvement. If teachers would have applied for the positions at our school, we might have begun with teachers already possessing innovative ideas, eager to engage in the process.

Evaluating our own actions brought to light many factors of professional development we hadn't considered before. Our most important realization is that analysis feeds the improvement process, not just for teachers, but for everyone. Paying attention to the effects of our actions informs future action. And even though it is the most difficult part of analysis, writing is what caused us to pay attention. Knowing that people we admire would be reading our writing significantly



# Reading Researchers:

## Creating Interest in Reading among Struggling Adolescent Readers

Cheryl B. Ritter

*Teaching reading begins with helping children to want the life of a reader and to envision that life for themselves.*

—Lucy Calkins (2001, p. 9)

I remember my mother reading books like *Peter Rabbit* to my younger brother and me during the day, and in the evening, my father would sit on the side of our bed and read to us from *Pinocchio*. My imagination made those stories come alive and transported me into magical and make-believe worlds. In first grade, I figured out how sounds turned into words, and my lifelong reading journey began. In third grade, my teacher asked me to help a boy in my class who struggled with reading. I spent time with him at a small, round table in the back of the classroom and helped him with words he didn't know. Although reading seemed easy and entertaining to me, I learned early that it was not always that easy for everyone.

Thus, my lifelong teaching journey began as well.

Last year I taught language arts at an all sixth-grade school. My students were almost all struggling readers, grouped into classes with similar needs according to their test scores on district and state tests. English language learners who were below grade level in reading by three or four grades formed one

of my classes, and the other class consisted of students who were native English speakers, but below grade level in reading or math by two or more grades. As a teacher researcher, and as a member of an educational community that has recently been obsessed with reading achievement and test scores, I found myself searching for inroads that could help my students become more successful in reading.

### My Students' Attitudes and Knowledge about Reading

During the first month of school, I learned as much as I could about what my students knew as readers. Students completed reading surveys, sight word tests, and reading inventories. Observing them read and conferencing with them helped me understand that most of my second language students could sound out words and read with some expression, but they quickly lost interest in a text because they did not understand the meanings of many of the words. Comprehension and sustained interest in reading was especially low.

Gabe had much in common with other students in this class. He spoke Spanish with his parents but English with his sister. During class discussions he was quiet, yet he often engaged in Spanish conversations with his friends during independent reading time. He enjoyed R.L. Stine's *Goosebumps* series, written at a third grade reading level. In a reading survey, he said that he felt "very good" about himself as a reader. Yet, in answer to the question "What does someone have to know or do in order to be a good reader?" he wrote, "They have to know the alphabet." Gabe was equating reading with understanding letters and words. I wanted him to keep his positive attitude but learn that reading was about making sense of a text.

My native English-speaking students were more openly resistant to reading or were challenged by multisyllabic words. Jenna was assigned to this class because she scored at the 59th percentile on the SAT9 in reading comprehension. Her response to the "good reader" survey question above was: "First they would have to practice reading

a lot, and then they would have to go to school and learn more about reading." She knew that getting better at reading would require "practice" and that there was more to learn about reading. But she, like many others in her class, often had a difficult time concentrating on a book during independent reading. She seemed more interested in friends and thought reading was "really boring." I wanted her to discover the entertainment value and relevance of reading to her life.

I quickly realized that sixth graders, especially those who were already behind in reading, paid more attention to each other than to anything I had to say. That was when an idea occurred to me. Perhaps I could use their interest in one another to teach the reading skills they would need to become better readers. I delved into the research on reading to find out more about how to structure classroom reading time.

### Research on Reading

Both Krashen (1995) and Deci (1995) convinced me that giving students daily, extended periods of time to read and choice of books was critical to improving motivation. Krashen (1995) said, "Reading itself promotes reading. A consistent finding in in-school free reading studies is that children who participate in these programs do more free reading than children in traditional

***I quickly realized that sixth graders, especially those who were already behind in reading, paid more attention to each other than to anything I had to say.***

comparison programs" (p. 40). One longitudinal study he cites, conducted by Greaney and Clarke (1975), looked at sixth grade boys who participated in an in-school free reading program for eight and one-half months. Not only did they spend more time doing leisure reading while they were in the program, but they also were still reading more

than comparison students six years later.

Deci (1995) found that giving students choice is a critical factor in motivation. Deci's research endorses a reading curriculum in which students have opportunities to choose their own books, time to read independently, and personal

***I wanted my students not only to be motivated and better able to comprehend, but also to be aware of their thinking process so that they could fix any difficulties they might have with comprehension.***

autonomy, where "self-initiation, experimentation, and responsibility" are encouraged (Deci, p. 42).

Wilhelm (1995) and Keene and Zimmermann (1997) helped me think more deeply about what readers "do" when they read. In *You Gotta BE the Book*, Wilhelm discovered that his more engaged middle school readers had an "intense visual experience," sometimes becoming the story characters (p. 85). He also found that his less engaged readers were simply reading words, not making meaning. Keene and Zimmermann introduced me to "cognitive reading strategies"—strategies that good readers use to solve comprehension problems or to deepen their understanding of a text. For example, when good readers recognize that they do not understand what they are reading, they choose a strategy to help them such as rereading or slowing down their reading pace. Good readers also deepen their understanding of a text by making connections with what they already know, asking questions for clarification, visualizing, predicting, synthesizing or summarizing, and knowing how to distinguish what is important from what is not. Keene and Zimmermann inspired me to think

about ways to make these reading strategies useful and of interest to my students.

When I reflected on my own thought process during reading, I realized that I pictured the scenes and characters in my books, and I heard their conversations. I changed the objects and people to be more like places I had been or people I had known. I questioned, predicted, and evaluated characters' actions. I noticed the rhythms of words in sentences, the flow of the language, and how each chapter left me wanting to read more. I felt happy, scared, or sad in response to events in the story. The secret thoughts that characters shared in books helped me feel less alone. I was on that protagonist's journey, and I came away changed from the experience. Although I had not called them "cognitive reading strategies," I became aware of the powerful difference they made in my reading experience.

I wanted my students not only to be motivated and better able to comprehend, but also to be aware of their thinking process so that they could fix any difficulties they might have with comprehension. If they could recognize when they did not understand a word, passage, or whole text, then they could apply strategies to repair their faulty comprehension. Brown, Armbruster, and Baker (1986) define this kind of thinking or "the control readers have of their own actions while reading for different purposes" (p. 49) as metacognition.

To help students become more metacognitive, Blakey and Spence (1990) suggest that teachers give students time to talk about problem-solving strategies they used during reading, and to let students assume more responsibility for their own learning by self-evaluating. If I wanted my students to become metacognitively skilled and self-regulated learners, I knew I needed to model these strategies and provide opportunities for them to think in important ways about their learning.

### **Reading Workshop**

My school district encouraged a "reading workshop" structure, origi-

nally introduced by Nancie Atwell, a middle school teacher in Maine (1987). In the reading workshop, students have extended periods of time to read and may choose their own books. Teachers model their own enthusiasm for literature and texts by reading aloud and silently with students, by conferring with students as they read, and by corresponding with students in letter form in reading journals. Teachers also focus students' attention on various aspects of being a reader during short lessons called mini-lessons prior to reading time.

Although the reading workshop supported readers in many different ways, I found that some elements were not developed with the needs of struggling readers in mind. Would struggling readers receive the kinds of strategy instruction they needed to make considerable reading gains? Could struggling readers

***I found that some elements were not developed with the needs of struggling readers in mind. Would struggling readers receive the kinds of strategy instruction they needed to make considerable reading gains?***

stay focused during these longer periods of reading time? Though the reading workshop model was promising, my students needed more focused attention on cognitive reading strategies, more time for reflecting on what they could learn about themselves as readers, and more opportunities to use their interest in one another to learn about reading in new ways.

### **Innovations on Reading Workshop**

In order to meet the needs of the struggling readers in my classes, I used the reading workshop as a basic structure for class time, but added activities that would

**Figure 1. Kristine's Student Researcher Form**

<p><b>Time it took for everyone to start reading:</b> 3 min.</p> <p><b>Total length of reading time:</b> 25 min.</p> <p><b>What questions do I have about what readers do?</b></p> <p>1. What do good readers think about when they're reading? 2. Can good readers concentrate the same when they're reading the books if they're reading with a friend? 3. What kind of books do good readers like?</p> <p><b>What I found out:</b> That good readers think about what's going to happen next or what the character is thinking or the author's thinking. They focus all on the book. That it can't be boring at first. It has to catch your attention.</p> <p><b>Other things I noticed:</b> I noticed when I came around and asked questions that Jason and Brandon could concentrate the same as if they were reading by themselves but reading out loud and they said yes because you can talk about what you just read and your opinion. Good readers like all kinds of books. I found out that when I looked at the books of people I was interviewing.</p>						<p><b>Key: R = reading</b> <b>NF = not focusing</b></p> <p><b>Kelly is the next researcher.</b></p>					
<b>Names</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>25</b>						
Amee	R	R	R	R	R	R					
Julie	R	R	R	R	R	R					
Cheyenne	R	R	R	R	R	R					
Alisha	NF	NF	R	R	R	R					
Amber	NF	NF	R	R	R	R					
<b>Kristine</b>	<b>Researcher</b>										
Brandon	R	R	R	R	R	R					
Jason	R	R	R	R	R	R					
Selena	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF					
Tom	R	R	R	R	R	R					
Nicole	R	R	R	R	R	R					
Jenna	R	R	R	R	R	R					
Bryan	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF					
Carol	Nurse's										
Jarred	R	R	R	R	R	R					
Stephanie	R	R	R	R	R	R					
Aaron	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF	NF					
<p><b>Personal reflection:</b> I think that today was a good day because you were all focused and quiet. The people I interviewed had good answers for my questions.</p>											
<p><b>What did I find out or notice today that might change the way I read:</b> I will start thinking about more things when I am reading than just visualizing and predicting.</p>											

help develop readers. Mini-lessons focused on the teaching of cognitive reading strategies by first demonstrating them and then asking students to practice using them during their independent reading time. As students read, I conferred, asking them to share how they were using the strategy we had discussed that day. We also did think-alouds, an activity in which readers make the reading process evident to others by articulating all that they are noticing, thinking, feeling, and doing as they read. I first modeled the think-aloud process, and later students did think-alouds for one another to demonstrate their own use of reading strategies as they read. Writing weekly goals and reflections was a third activity that established a purpose for reading. It also provided students with a chance to challenge themselves and allowed them to reflect on their own abilities to meet their goals.

Keeping in mind what good readers do and the interest students have in one another at the sixth grade level, I developed an additional task for students. During the 30 minutes of independent reading, one student became a "student researcher," that is, someone who researched the reading behaviors of others. Dialogue, Summer 2003

Student researchers observed, recorded data, asked questions, recorded findings, and applied what they learned to their own reading lives.

Of these activities, the student researcher job was the most popular. During independent reading time, a previous student researcher selected a student to observe other students while they were independently reading. The researchers each had a data collection sheet on which they wrote questions for research, recorded findings, collected data on students reading, and wrote a reflection (see Figure 1). When independent reading was over, the student researchers reported their findings to the class. As student researchers, students had opportunities to look closely and notice the behaviors of students who were reading. Watching reading behaviors made elements of the reading process visible for struggling readers and seemed to help motivate them when it was their turn to read.

From the very first day, I noticed that student researchers enjoyed the opportunity to watch their peers read. Their enthusiasm was high, as reflected in Manuel's comment:

"I really like looking at other kids my age reading! Mostly when everyone was into their books." For students who struggled with reading, it may have been a welcome relief from having to read, but my hope was that it would provide them with valuable learning and increased interest in reading at the same time.

Initially, students were drawn to the "moving targets," that is, students who were out of their seats or talking during reading time. Comments such as "Selena was talking" or "Gabe has gum" were more common than "Everyone was doing good." A couple of weeks into the activity, I noticed that a few students wrote "keys" to record data on what fellow students were doing: R—reading, G—goal writing, T—talking to teacher, W—writing, L—looking for a book. In addition, they were finding some specific things to say about readers and reading: "Gabe was searching for a book" or "Amee is reading good and focusing." However, I wanted more students to focus on the specific and positive reading behaviors of others.

After a month, I gave students additional direction. In a mini-lesson, I showed overheads of six student researcher data collection sheets that contained specific information about reading behaviors. For example, Juanita wrote the question: "Why do some students not like to read?" Juanita then attempted to answer the question with her own ideas. Several students had specific observations about how students were reading (physical positions, places in the room, or with partners).

Students were highly engaged as I shared these forms. They not only seemed interested in seeing their own form on a transparency ("Show mine!"), but they also seemed interested in what others had to say about them or about reading in general. After the mini-lesson, I charted answers to the question: "What can we learn from being a student researcher?" Student responses included:

- books that people like
- how people read keeping track with their finger
- who is reading the same book

Time Period	Students Mentioning Strategies	Student Samples	
		Cheyenne	Daniella
1 <sup>st</sup> time	1	Feb. "People are doing math, looking at reading chart, reading together, reading in different places."	Jan. "Elonzo was playing around. Gabe was throwing papers to Oscar. Gabe was talking to Gilbert."
2 <sup>nd</sup> time	15	May. "What strategies do they use? What kinds of books do they like? Stephanie visualizes and likes mysteries. Kristine visualizes and likes fiction. Nicole visualizes and likes fiction. Ameer visualizes, questions, and likes mysteries, humor and fiction. People are moving around. People like to read with the book in their hands or either on the table with their head down."	Feb. "Who is inferring, connecting, or predicting?" Elonzo was predicting. Juanita was connecting to the book. Yolanda was predicting what was going to happen. Juan was predicting and visualizing. Rosa was predicting what was going to happen. Gilbert was predicting and doing text-to-text. Francisco was predicting and inferring. Lilia was questioning and inferring. Most of the things I noticed is that the kids like U.F.O. stories."

**Table 1. Increased Mention of Reading Strategies**

- *who likes to read*
- *who is playing around*
- *who is on task*
- *who gets right to reading*
- *who seems into their book*
- *the types of books students are reading*

These responses were then used as questions to pose during student research.

I soon began to see evidence of a change in student interest. Some students were noticing what other students were doing as they read and applying those ideas to their own reading behavior. For example, Roberto noticed that three students were reading the same book together and were thinking aloud. As a student researcher, he "heard good connections" and wrote, "I will maybe do the same as Yolanda, Lourdes, and Rosa." I also began to notice that more students were writing about real reading behaviors rather than "telling on" others who were not reading.

In late spring, the final version of the student researcher form included another change ("Questions I have about what readers do"). I emphasized the word "readers" as opposed to students who were not reading because students needed to remember that their job was to watch and learn from those students who *were* reading. I also reworded the final question to be: "What did I find out or notice today that might

change the way I read?"

Kristine, a student in my afternoon class, asked questions that required her to interview some students, which she did (see Figure 1). Her thinking represented more research-like behavior than I had seen so far. She asked the question, "What do good readers think about when they're reading?" and then interviewed students. She found out that "good readers think about what's going to happen next or what the character is thinking or the author's thinking. They focus all on the book." Finding out this information helped her to think about ways she could improve as a reader ("I will start thinking more things when I am reading than just visualizing and predicting"). I was excited about this development and encouraged other students to follow suit.

Kristine was an exceptional student and often took leadership roles. She had been assigned to my class because she had scored below grade level in math on the SAT9, though she was strong in reading. She modeled for me and for other students in the class what the student researcher job could become. She was the first to actually interview students and find answers to what was going on in their minds as they read. This kind of active curiosity about reading is what I wanted all my students to emulate.

As I hoped, other students began

asking questions of each other during the reading time. Most of those questions had to do with the kinds of reading strategies their classmates were using which indicated to me that they were becoming more aware that readers use strategies to make sense of the text and to be engaged. Table 1 shows how the mention of reading strategies on the student researcher forms increased over time. In the beginning, many students, like Daniella and Cheyenne (see Table 1, right), noticed students who were "fooling around" and not reading. However, the second time they took the role of student researcher, their focus had shifted to determining what reading strategies classmates were using as they read. Even though none of the prompts asked specifically for strategies, almost half of the students mentioned something about reading strategies their second time. Their questions indicated that they had thought about what good readers do and were more interested and knowledgeable about these strategies.

I especially enjoyed reading how students would change their reading behavior as a result of being a student researcher. At the bottom of these forms, I prompted students with "How this might change me as a reader." Quite often, I noticed that students did, in fact, make some changes in the way they approached independent reading time because of their new insights. Hector was one of those students who used his insights as a catalyst for change.

Hector, whose primary language was Spanish, was a student researcher four times. He was a thoughtful student who contributed often to classroom discussions and seemed to take his learning seriously. One day I asked students to write about how reading helped them in their lives, and he wrote:

*Reading has helped me in my life by whenever I go to the store I can read the prices and when I go to the mall it's the same thing. Reading has helped me because when mom or dad ask me a question about something they don't know, I can help them with it. Reading has helped me because when something comes from the mail and my parents can't read it, I can help them. It*

*has helped me get places. I have learned that reading is one of the most important parts about*

Hector knew that reading English was an important life skill.

Table 2 (below) shows a copied version of what Hector wrote each time he was a student researcher. The first three columns include the date, his writing as found in the “observa-

Being a student researcher also seemed to help students become more interested in reading. Many students noticed and thought about the books others were reading. They would ask questions like “Do they read just one kind of book or all kinds of books?” They also wrote observations like “Roberto and Alfonso are reading the book soccer and baseball,” or “A lot of people like different books. Some kids like

tions regarding what other students thought about as they read. Students asked general questions like “What are they thinking?” or more specific questions regarding strategies like “Do they use most or all strategies?” As a silent observer of readers, student researchers were often left to their imaginations as to the answers to their questions until some students finally decided to find answers to those questions by asking students. For example, Stephanie found out that “Kristine is visualizing, predicting, asking questions. Jarred is visualizing, questioning, connecting.” Stephanie used this information to reflect on how she might change as a reader by saying, “To use more strategies and to find a book that I’m interested in and I like.” Over time, students became more curious and ultimately more aware of their peers’ thinking and the strategies they were using as they read, and they were able to apply what they learned to their own reading lives, just like good readers do.

Finally, students applied what they were learning about others’ reading behaviors to their own lives and indicated intent to change. After noticing “People were reading the whole time,” Alfonso wrote, “I have to focus more like the other boys and girls when they are reading.” Several students wrote similar comments about the need to become more focused. Some wrote about wanting to use reading strategies they knew others used, wanting to read with a partner as they had observed others doing, or wanting to read a popular book. In a sense, closely watching students read acted as a catalyst to improving their reading behaviors. Table 3 (below) shows the progress students made in each of those areas from their first time being a student researcher to their second time.

Students developed new insights about reading from the student researcher activity, perhaps because

<b>Student Researcher as Observer of Independent Reading</b>			
<b>Date</b>	<b>Questions and Observations</b>	<b>Reflection</b>	<b>Follow-Up Actions (teacher observations)</b>
1-17	<i>I noticed that this class likes to read the mystery books. 10 minutes when all the class was reading.</i>	<i>Having the chance of being a student researcher showed me how the teacher feel.</i>	
2-27	<i>Why do they read with their hands on their head? I found out that some kids like to read books about UFOs. They really like the new books. They were reading the new books.</i>	<i>A lot of people were really reading. I can see that the new books are very interesting and I am going to read one.</i>	<i>Hector read several of the new books.</i>
3-5	<i>Why do people talk? Why do people play around when it's time to read? I found out Roberto and Francisco and Daniella talk too much. I noticed water bottles are a toy for them.</i>	<i>I really like being a student researcher. I learn not to sit by someone I can talk to.</i>	<i>After this insight, Hector asked if he could sit in a desk that was off to the side. He found that he could concentrate better there. He continued this practice most of the year.</i>
5-9	<i>What kind of books are being read? I found out that most people sit on the floor to read. I notice they like to read books on tape.</i>	<i>I will like to read a book on tape next time.</i>	<i>When Hector was through with the book he was reading, he began listening to a book on tape.</i>

**Table 2. Hector’s Student Researcher Forms and Follow-Up Actions**

tions and questions” section, and his writing in the “reflection” section.

In the last column I wrote actions that I observed Hector taking afterwards.

Hector was a student who acted on his new knowledge. The prompt that asked how he might change as a reader seemed to nudge him to take action. If he had not had that prompt or had the opportunity to reflect on what he had learned from being a student researcher, he might not have had reason to act on his insights. Having that opportunity to reflect and to transfer what he observed others do to his life as a reader made him a more empowered learner.

to read little books instead of big ones.” Cheyenne wrote, “Kristine likes fiction. Ameer likes mysteries, humor and fiction. I like fiction also.” Paying attention to the kinds of books other students were reading and identifying with them by having similar book interests are the kinds of behaviors that happen in a community of readers.

An increasing number of students, as student researchers, asked ques-

**Table 3. Increase in Student Interest in Books, Peer Thinking and Personal Change (n=30)**

	<b>Student Researcher</b>	
	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Time</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Time</b>
<b>Interest in books</b>	15%	50%
<b>Questions regarding student thinking during reading</b>	3%	56%
<b>Wanting to make changes as a result of being a student researcher</b>	0%	57%

it gave them an opportunity to be in charge—to be, as Lourdes put it, “like a second teacher.” Giving students important responsibilities tells them that the teacher trusts them, and I believe it is that element of trust, along with high expectations, that helps students perform their tasks with an honest sense of responsibility. Also, in much the same way an artist gains a deeper connection with the object being painted by pausing and looking more closely, that “close look” gives the observer some control over the thing being observed, an awareness of its patterns, and thus its predictability. The observer can feel more comfortable and more interested. Some of my students who had a hard time settling in to reading became serious and careful student researchers, and I had to believe

**Teaching is a research project.... Each day brings new insights, new challenges, and new questions to answer.**

that eventually the experience would help them connect to reading and become better readers.

Francisco was a student whose experience being a student researcher seemed to make a difference. Initially, he did not settle into reading easily. When students were recording what he was doing during independent reading, they found that he was only on task about half the time, and the other half, he was talking or playing around. However, after Francisco was a student researcher a second time, his actions changed and he became more focused. Instead of being engaged with books only half the time, he was totally engaged.

Over the year, the student researcher activity evolved dramatically, but in all its stages, students seemed to find it engaging and, in their words, “fun.” That element of engagement or “fun” is important in learning. Since students feel emotionally positive about doing the activity, the learning that the activity provides occurs almost involun-

tarily. Being student researchers enabled them to observe readers at work, to notice books, to think about what was going on in their heads, and to practice new strategies as a result of their close observations. Carol’s comment about student researchers spoke for many others: “I think you should do student researcher next year because I think it’s really fun and it lets you know what other readers do and think about when they read.”

Teaching is a research project. Each decision builds upon the knowledge gained from previous classroom successes and failures. Each day brings new insights, new challenges, and new questions to answer. But it is the teacher’s willingness to learn from the students, to be a researcher every day, and to seek creative ways to meet the changing needs of those students that is most conducive to their learning.

Last year, I asked my students to become researchers of reading. When it was their turn to take the role of “second teacher” by looking closely at each other, they took the job seriously. As each was chosen to be the student researcher for the day, they would grab their pencils, walk to the front of the room, and sit down on the tall, white author’s chair. With clipboard and Student Researcher Log in hand, they would flip to the next data collection form, set the timer, and begin. Like detectives, their eyes would scan the room slowly and carefully. They needed to see everyone in that room in order to collect accurate data. They needed to think about behaviors that caught their attention, questions they wanted to ask. They wrote down what they learned and used that information to become better readers.

I, too, have been changed by this year of research. By working with students who, at this age, were more interested in each other than what the teacher had to say, by working with English language learners who were still not comfortable with this new language, and my fluent English students who had not achieved grade-level expectations in reading, I learned how to teach to the needs of my students, needs that I had not experienced in previous

years. It was an extraordinary year for me, one in which I grew and learned a great deal.

My own membership in a research community of teachers and students has enlightened me. I know how important it is to look closely at reading instruction, to make hypotheses and test them out, and to never stop questioning. When students feel valued and trusted, they will rise to the occasion. They will engage. They will adapt. And they will surprise.

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# Teacher Research: *Learning to Listen*

Jennifer Moore

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When friends from out of town visit, I often take them jogging around my hometown. I have routes I have run hundreds of times; they are so familiar, I run as if on automatic pilot. I seem to forget, though, that my guest has no idea that this is where I turn left, and that is the place where I cross the street to run on the other side...on more than one occasion, I have nudged a friend off the sidewalk or run right into them in my single-minded routine. I forget to ask questions, to explain, to direct, to instruct. I forget that my friends are not mind-readers, and that they may already have a route in mind. I forget that my running partner is peering around at unfamiliar sights, unaware of where we are heading and when we will finish. I forget to think outside of myself. I have learned this year that I sometimes practice the same habits in my classroom.

I made the decision last spring to seek a position teaching high school English. After participating in the San Diego Area Writing Project Invitational Institute and implementing Writer's Workshop in my 7th grade Humanities classroom, I found that my passion for writing

***I came to school that September with my arms and bookbags full of assumptions about the older students I would be teaching in my new job.***

was leading me away from social studies. I was ready for a change, and thought, if this is the what 7th graders can do, imagine the writing that more experienced students will produce. I longed to experience the kind of repartee I enjoyed with my SDAWP fellows, reading and writing literature and giving one another honest, helpful feedback. Professional readings such as Barry Lane's *After the End* and Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle* reinforced the notion that students at any level were capable of engaging in deep

and meaningful conversations about their writing. I knew this because my 7th graders had mastered peer response, both in editing one another's work and in responding to pieces read aloud. We had held a poetry reading in a local café, with the success of the event fueled by my students' enthusiasm, intensity, and pride in their work. I assumed that 12th graders in a creative writ-

ing class were already creative writers and that if I provided the structure, their writing would drive the class. I was unprepared for the contrast between what I expected and who the students were. Fortunately, I would use this class as the basis for my first foray into teacher research. Although my original intent was to study my students' writing practices, my research shifted to my own ways of engaging with students. I learned

about listening, asking questions, and planning the "running" route of instruction together with my students—lessons that can be applied to anyone making the transition between grade levels—or countries, or faculties, for that matter.

I came to school that September with my arms and bookbags full of assumptions about the older students I would be teaching in my new job. Based on my experience with middle-level students, I expected my students to be even more gen-

uine, enthusiastic writers, who were enrolled in the class to write deep pieces and to help one another grow as artists. I assumed each student would have his or her own goals for growth in writing; some of them would be playwrights, I imagined, some would be poets. I set a structure for my class around two assignments per week: one "new" process piece, and one rewritten one, which

would be thoroughly edited by peers and the instructor and finally revised by the student. I created daily writing prompts around the first six-week unit on "Memoir," but I allowed students the freedom to interpret the final project in their own ways. I was confident that I had created an environment with just the right blend of structure and autonomy, and quickly established and introduced my system to the class.

During our first extended block period, after collecting students' writing pieces, I informed them we would be responding to one another's work, applying the tried-and-true procedure I had used in middle school to my high school course. I advised them that I would randomly pass out the writing pieces and that students would respond and return edited pieces to a designated pile to trade for another. Students who wished to share publicly would have the opportunity to do so during the "Author's Chair" period near the end of class. This was the general system my 7th graders had internalized. During a typical "workshop," they would read and respond to three or four peers' pieces and then resume their own writing.

On this first day of Writer's

Workshop in my senior class, widespread panic in the form of sputtering protests and shocked and uncomfortable expressions erupted in my classroom. Sarah, who had introduced herself on the first day and asserted both her enthusiasm for writing and her wariness of my ability to nurture her talents, piped up, "Last year, we had 'Open Easel.' We liked it that way, didn't we? Can't we do it the way we've always done it?" I asked for a definition of this system of peer response. "Open Easel is where we push the chairs back and sit in a circle on the floor, and we just go around and whoever wants to share, does, and we give them feedback."

I was a little concerned with the "mushiness" of this approach, since my goal was for my students to have extensive feedback on their writing,

***I had assumed the students would readily adapt to my ideas of how a writing class should work, and then I assumed that I couldn't negotiate with them.***

but I was also very eager to demonstrate my willingness to compromise and value their judgment. I agreed that we would use Open Easel as our main mode of responding to one another's writing. It soon became clear that while this model of peer response was comfortable for them, it had its own limitations. Invariably, the same students shared, and the same students expressed frustration that they weren't getting the constructive, in-depth feedback they wanted. I bit my tongue to avoid imparting a sense of "I told you so" and to avoid steering them ungracefully in an entirely new direction. In unilaterally imposing my own structure on this group of wise and mature students and then eagerly compromising to avoid conflict with them, I learned valuable lessons about making assumptions. I had assumed the students would readily adapt to my ideas of how a writing class should work, and then I assumed that I couldn't negotiate with them. I had lost an opportunity in the first week or two to share my goals with the class and ask them about their preferences and ideas for peer response. There was

a middle ground between their comfort zone and my curricular goals, and I had to back up and find it. Lingering frustration with our system of peer response led me to formulate my teacher research question around how to help my students invest in their writing and seek to improve, revise, and expand on their first drafts.

I was nervous about my new position and how I would be viewed and treated by my students. I was accustomed to teaching middle school students. They were independent thinkers and diverse personalities, but my authority and role as facilitator was rarely disputed. 12th graders, I worried, were not only closer to my own age, but were capable of seeing me as a peer with questionable authority, or paradoxically, as someone who was naïve or

unsympathetic to their concerns. I was preoccupied with establishing the right balance. My way of assuring them I was a considerate listener with open lines of communication and a fair instructor who acknowledged students' individuality was to give them an extensive sheet of introductory questions concerning their backgrounds, goals, and concerns, and I responded to each student individually. My way of assuring myself that there was no room for chaos or coup d'état was to hit the ground running, keeping

***Maybe my goal would be to inspire a love of writing in those students who lacked it, while continuing to encourage and develop the ardent young writers in my classroom.***

them busy within my comforting framework. My own insecurity about my place in the classroom led me to ignore theirs; perhaps I was more concerned about the class working for me than for them. Rather than listen carefully to my students, their interactions, and reactions, I kept them at a distance

while changing modalities whenever there was a complaint. The true character of my students and the class was made known to me only gradually. But when I slowed down and truly thought about what I had observed and learned from my students individually, I reconsidered my format of instruction and my personal goals for their collective achievement.

Unlike a 7th grade humanities class, which represents a cross-section of 7th graders irrespective of ability, creative writing at our high school is an elective English class. I assumed this meant that only students who truly loved creative writing would take the course. It took me several weeks to discover that some of my students had never written freely or in a "creative," non-expository genre, and furthermore, a handful of students did not really care for writing at all. Some of the more dedicated writers intimated to me that the creative writing class was viewed by many as an "easy" alternative to 12th grade English. My students ranged from Allan, who was struggling with organization and basic grammar and preferred word art to narrative writing; to Anna, a student learning English as her second language whose poetry featured rich vocabulary and complicated syntax that often obscured meaning. Allan admitted that this was his "fun class," and used workshop time to do homework for other classes. Anna would return to my room several times a day with drafts of her poems. I had expected a classroom of Annas, but I reminded myself that it was my responsibility to teach students whatever their writing skills or interests. Maybe my goal would

be to inspire a love of writing in those students who lacked it, while continuing to encourage and develop the ardent young writers in my classroom.

In my effort to transform my students with a half-hearted interest in writing and value their efforts, I

took each piece of writing turned in by my students very seriously—more seriously, I discovered, than they often did, and this presented a whole host of new problems between me and my charges. When I returned the first batches of writing pieces with extensive feedback, I was amazed by the range of reac-

tion and grading period that I acknowledged the tension between the students and myself and among the students themselves. One thing I had prided myself on in the past was my ability to build and maintain a close-knit community of learners in my 7th grade classroom—students recognized our class as a safe

of the year, and the “ice” had never really been broken. In return, I shared some of the insecurities and fears I had about teaching high school, being fair, and achieving what I considered my job to be—teaching and encouraging creative writing. After students aired their feelings, I understood that it was important for me to consider new ways of fostering community, as well as new ways of responding to students’ writing and teaching writing itself, and that it wasn’t too late to do so. Suddenly my research was not focused on revision and my students’ approach to their writing. The real question needing to be answered was about how I was relating to my students and to their writing—and how they were responding to me.

***When an argument about religion erupted in the classroom one day I realized there were multiple issues in the class that were begging for attention.***

tions to my suggestions. While I believed my responses were thoughtful and encouraging, to many students, the sheer breadth of coverage of their work was intimidating and even hurtful. Some shared that editing marks on their essays in other English classes were understandable, and were not viewed as quite so personal. A good many of my students expected that their very heartfelt creative writing was not to be “messed with” or judged. It represented their thoughts—how could one revise feelings? My internal answer was, but your deep thoughts have grammatical errors and clichés! Surely you can state that in a way that better captures your true sentiments! Overheard in my classroom on more than one occasion were students muttering, “But I liked it that way.” While some of them, like Anna, greatly appreciated my attention to her writing (“No teacher has ever asked me to work on my writing—I think they were afraid to say they didn’t understand it!”), others, like Lisa, developed a sense that I didn’t like them, and that creative writing was a chore. I didn’t even think about the fact that Rebecca, a student receiving Special Education services, might be sensitive to my corrections of her grammatical errors. My fears of being “in front” of the class meant that I was dedicating more to responding to their writing as it was than to nurturing the process. They knew that their writing was, in effect, the curriculum, and felt incredible pressure to perform. Some simply gave up.

haven, free for the most part from name-calling and teasing. But my high school class and some of their deep-rooted convictions called for greater measures than “can’t we all just get along?” Sarah and her School of the Arts cohort were vocally liberal, and I had several conservative, fundamentalist Christians in the class as well. Not only did they have trouble respecting one another’s views, negative comments about one another’s writing (“I just can’t relate to stuff about God.” “Your piece makes me personally uncomfortable.”) had been heard in the classroom.

When an argument about religion erupted in the classroom one day I realized there were multiple issues in the class that were begging for attention. One student fled the classroom in tears, and the remaining students and I discussed what was happening in our class. Students shared a variety of observations. They noted that groups in

I brought very little data to my next Teacher Research group meeting. The research on revision practices among my students had, quite honestly, been sidelined by more immediate issues of classroom community. It was at this meeting, when I shared some of the things I had learned anecdotally from my students about the role of the writing instructor, that I understood that teacher research was not always about studying students specifically. In this case, I could learn more by studying my own behavior and how it impacted achievement in my classroom. I drafted another extensive mid-term student survey (see the Appendix on page 29), encouraging everyone to be honest and direct about their feelings about the class, themselves as writers, the instructor, and each other. I read these surveys with the careful attention I should have given my stu-

***.... I understood that teacher research was not always about studying students specifically. In this case, I could learn more by studying my own behavior and how it impacted achievement in my classroom.***

our class had been allowed to segregate themselves from one another because of the free seating arrangement. They pointed out that there had been very few community-building activities at the beginning

dents from the beginning. This idea of inquiring—of probing students for their concerns, personalities, and ideas about writing and response—struck me as the most vital aspect of building community

It wasn’t until the middle of the sec-

and curriculum in a writing class. Rather than, say, stepping out of the house with running shoes on and embarking on the pre-planned route, I recognized the value of trust and collaboration: *How far do you see us running today? Would you like to run on the sand or the sidewalk?*

The next step was negotiation. I learned from the surveys that while some students were looking for more instruction, others were seeking the freedom to explore their own styles and genres. Through discussions about their responses to

***The next step was negotiation. I learned from the surveys that while some students were looking for more instruction, others were seeking the freedom to explore their own styles and genres.***

my questions, we decided together that my prompts and writing ideas were guides, options that some students would rely on and from which others would pick and choose. We both agreed that I was assigning too many pieces meant to adhere to strict categories (there were times when students were more interested in creating a new piece than in revising an old one), but that revision and re-writes would still be required. Students wanted to retain Open Easel—even those who said they were never comfortable sharing aloud. Since I felt that every student should receive peer feedback and that oral response as the only method was limiting, I told students I wanted to resume the trading of papers for written feedback. Students suggested that authors could indicate to editors at the bottom of papers what kind of feedback they were seeking—grammatical, structural, etc., in order to maintain some control and safety. This kind of give-and-take allowed us to implement aspects of Writing Workshop that I felt were non-negotiable while students felt assured that their concerns were being heard. There continued to be students with whom I worked individually, those who wished to exceed the expectations of the requirements, and those whose devised projects did not conform to the assignments.

Some students found my feedback on their papers to be utterly necessary for their growth as writers, and a few, like Lisa, shared that they felt “attacked and criticized.” In our discussions about response, I realized that I had begun to think I was not doing my job if I were not delivering in-depth feedback on each and every piece of writing turned in by my students. Students honestly admitted that “rubber stamp” approval of their writing from time to time actually motivated them to spend more time on pieces with more extensive feedback; they were confident, then, that some of their

work was already “perfect.” I recognized that my goal did not have to be to transform each student in my class into a deep and meaningful writer, but that I could concentrate more on nurturing their love for and comfort with writing. Sometimes that meant actually letting go of criticism, allowing opportunities for “pride of ownership” to happen. Not every piece of writing requires overhauling—and some students were going to take their writing further than others. I discovered that, in terms of running/writing partners, meeting their needs was ultimately more important than finishing the four-mile run I imagined. *If you're tired at any point and need to walk, let me know...but if you're willing, I will push you farther.*

Finally, as I relaxed the reins and allowed more dialogue among students as well as between myself and students in the classroom, I could sense all of us growing more comfortable with each other and with writing. When there was extra time remaining in a class session, I would ask for “state of the union” addresses, and more students expressed enthusiasm for the class and their writing. Students who were frustrated felt more comfortable consulting me, and there were no conflicts between students during the second semester. Control is

often a teacher’s tool to ward off chaos, and once my fears of anarchy were allayed, I could revel in my students’ ability to ask for time to write, time to share, and time to take a break, without seeing those requests as threats to my curricular goals or signs that I was a “pushover.” I also learned that by 12th grade, I could not undo years of resentment and suspicion between groups and individual students; my students were not necessarily going to learn to love one another. I could, however, help them practice separating personal and academic camaraderie and foster ways of helping one another with their writing despite personal and ideological differences.

By the end of the year I observed more students investing in their writing through revision and experimentation with different styles and genres. Although my teacher research was no longer based on revision, I saw a rise in both the number of students rewriting draft pieces, and the number of times students revised individual pieces. The students’ final projects, collections of writings about the high school experience, were completed at a time when students are typically distracted by end-of-year activities and graduation. The projects represented students’ dedication to the writing process (every piece had been revised) and demonstrated that most students understood and appreciated the value of writing as a form of creative and individual expression—my ultimate goal for them.

*(Learning to Listen, continued on page 30)*

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## Appendix: Midterm Survey (October 27, 2000)

Dear Creative Writers,

*We are eight weeks into the year but have a long way to go, and I thought this might be a good time for reflection. Everyone has an aspect of his/her life that is challenging, and in my job, this class is it. This is my first time teaching creative writing, and my first time teaching 12th graders. I think there are still some "kinks" to work out. And there is no one whose thoughts matter more to me than yours. I would like to give you this opportunity to honestly assess the class. I do not want you to be worried about your feedback affecting your grade or my feelings about you; respond anonymously if you prefer. I need to hear from you to be the best teacher possible for ALL students. And the class can only meet your needs if you express them. Be as honest and specific as you can.*

1. Rank the following reasons for taking this class, in terms of their influence on your decision to sign up (1=greatest reason; 6=least important reason for taking Creative Writing). Be honest!!

- I took the class last year and automatically signed up
  - I am already a "creative writer" and this is a chance to improve my skills
  - I thought it might be easier than regular English
  - I haven't done particularly well in "typical" English classes and want an alternative
  - I need English credit
  - I haven't done much creative writing and want to explore that side of myself (try it out)
- other: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Given your responses above, to what extent is the class meeting your primary needs or expectations?

3. There are different motives for being in the class and different levels of participation. What challenges do you see us facing as a group? What appears to be a conflict/area of discomfort in the class?

4. Do you feel comfortable as a writer in this class? Why or why not?

5. Do you feel comfortable sharing/joining discussions in this class? Why or why not?

6. Do you feel supported by the instructor in this class? (Be brave, and be honest.)

7. Are the comments on your papers helpful to you as a writer? Are they too positive or too negative? Do you understand them? Do they damage your ego (I am serious here!)?

8. Do you feel supported by your peers in this class?

9. Do you feel comfortable with the grading structure of the class? Why or why not? Be specific.

10. Are the rubrics fair/helpful to good writing? What else should they include?

Comment on the format of the class:

11. What do you think about the six-week themes and projects so far?

12. What do you think about having 10-15 minutes set aside for writing at the beginning of each class?

13. What do you think about the weekly prompts? Are they helpful? Interesting? Too structured/not structured enough? Should I spend more time explaining them?

14. What do you think about the readings? Interesting? Too much? Should we read more? Should we read more novels together?

15. Do you find responding to the readings helpful? Interesting? Too free-form/not enough freedom? Do you think we should incorporate essays into this class? Why or why not?

16. What do you think about turning in a new piece each week? Is there enough direction?

17. What do you think about rewriting every week? Is it helping you create something "good"?

18. What do you think of in-class lessons and activities? Do I spend enough time on instruction, or should I do more whole-class activities?

19. What do you think about class discussions? Do I ask enough questions? How can I encourage people to participate, and ensure that more than a few voices are heard?

20. What do you think of Block Days/Open Easel? Is our format working for you? Why or why not? How could it be more comfortable as well as more helpful to your writing?

21. What other methods of peer and instructor response would you like to see implemented or tried out in this class?

22. What ideas do you have for this class? Help me make this a good class for you!

23. What do you need or want from me to become a better writer, or to feel better/more comfortable in my class?

24. What other comments do you have about me as a teacher or about the creative writing class?

(Learning to Listen, continued from page 28)

Luckily, I recognized that my initial “one-size-fits-all” approach would alienate students before I took it too far, though not every student thoroughly enjoyed the class and grew tremendously as a writer. I have come to recognize that this is not a requirement for success as a teacher. I needed to acknowledge students beyond their writing and English personae—they are students who write but do other things as well. Although we are in the business of student growth and achievement, I learned that these are harder to measure in the realm of creative writing, and have much to do with the psychological and social state of each student. Teachers who communicate with students only through the medium of their subject area risk losing an opportunity to connect with students whose talents are not in that particular area. I would like my students to feel, instead of “Miss Moore and I just finished a 10-mile run, and boy, do I need a break from running,” that “We went running, and talked, and it was hard, and it felt good, and you know, I just might go for a jog on my own now!”

One of the most exciting aspects of teacher research is that it helped me focus on the vital questions related to my instructional practices. Through the intense introspection involved in teacher research, I had, in effect, invited myself to be videotaped running students off the road. While my initial goal in allowing for that close examination of my practice may have been to critique student stride or speed, I wound up recognizing how my own actions and pedagogical methods affected their results and feelings about the run itself. Writing about the experience has deepened my understanding of my role in my students’ learning and how to apply what I have learned to this year’s team of “runners.” A teacher researcher is a listener—someone actively engaged in making new discoveries about her students, her teaching and herself. In my first year of this process, I learned that listening is, indeed, the most important part.



## The Teacher Researcher's Bookshelf

**Interested in learning more about the process of teacher research? Here is a bibliography of publications about the history of teacher research, how to begin your own process of inquiry, and accounts of individual teachers' experiences with classroom research.**

Brause & Mayher. (1991). *Search and Re-search*. London: Falmer Press

Cambourne, Brian & Jan Turbill, eds.(1994). *Responsive Evaluation: Making Valid Judgements about Student Literacy*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Cochran-Smith, Marilyn and Susan Lytle. (1993). *Inside-Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge*. NY: Teachers College Press.

Connelly, F. Michael & D. Jean Clandinin, eds.. (1999). *Shaping a Professional Identity: Stories of Educational Practice*. NY: Teachers College Press.

Connelly, F. Michael & D. Jean Clandinin. (2000). *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

Fishman, Stephen & Lucille McCarthy. (2000). *Unplayed Tapes: A Personal History of Collaborative Teacher Research*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Frank, Carolyn. (1999). *Ethnographic Eyes: A Teacher's Guide to Classroom Observation*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Hubbard, Ruth Shagoury and Brenda Miller Power. (1993). *The Art of Classroom Inquiry: A Handbook for Teacher-Researchers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann

Hubbard, Ruth Shagoury and Brenda Miller Power.(1999). *Living the Questions: A Guide for Teacher Researchers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Loughran, John, Mitchell, Ian & Judie Mitchell, eds. (2002). *Learning From Teacher Research*. NY: Teachers College Press.

MacLean, Marion & Marian Mohr. (1999). *Teacher-Researchers At Work*. Berkeley, CA: National Writing Project.

Meyer, Richard J. (1998). *Composing a Teacher Study Group: Learning about Inquiry in Primary Classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Pinnell, Gay Su & Myna L Martin. (1989). *Teachers and Research: Language Learning in the Classroom*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Power, Brenda Miller. (1996). *Taking Note: Improving Your Observational Notetaking*. York, ME: Stenhouse.

*(Kim Douillard, continued from page 1)*  
*How has SDAWP's Teacher Research group evolved over the years?*

We have expanded to all grade levels. We are no longer all researching the same question. As I have learned about teacher research, we have incorporated new information into our TR group. My MA research informed my views and knowledge about TR, and others have experienced this as well. Our Spencer Grant has expanded our horizons, allowed us to fund Dr. Paula Levin as a mentor, and helped us to focus on writing. ICTR (International Conference for Teacher Research) has also influenced the group. It has broadened our audience and put us in touch with other TRs nationally and internationally. We have hosted the conference here in San Diego and have had teacher researchers attend and present at the conference. Our involvement with the National Writing Project (NWP) also continues to help us grow. We have presented at the NWP fall meeting for the last two years in the teacher research strand. I am currently participating in an online teacher research group with Marian Mohr; as part of the TIC (teacher inquiry communities) network.

*What do you consider the vital aspects of Teacher Research?*

Observation, documentation, and reflection—I am also a big fan of including students in the research. I think a group helps—it gives you an audience and provides feedback and pushes you forward with more questions.

*How is a Teacher Researcher different from a regular classroom teacher?*

TRs use what they learn from their students to improve their practice and share what they have learned outside of their classroom.

*Why aren't more teachers Teacher Researchers?*

I think a lot of teachers think it sounds scary—that it means more work and that they have to be "good" to even embark on the journey. The reality is that many teachers already do some form of

teacher research in their classroom. They are already using student work and their own observations to inform the choices they make in their teaching.

*What do you see as the obstacles?*

TIME, and schools don't encourage teachers to engage in TR—there isn't any support. Our current version of TR includes a variety of times/days—we meet monthly, sometimes on evenings, sometimes

**I think TR has given me courage and confidence. I know what I know and why I believe what I believe. I am not easily swayed by the waves in education.**

on Saturday afternoons, and this year we have also included four release days (time to meet during the school day). The group itself is the greatest support—our meetings are energizing and reassuring.

*How has Teacher Research changed your practice and your view of yourself as a classroom teacher?*

Wow! This is a big question! Teacher research has made me pay close attention to my students—whenever I need to figure out something about teaching, I go to my students. I think TR has given me courage and confidence. I know what I know and why I believe what I believe. I am not easily swayed by the waves in education. TR has made me a professional—I value my profession. It is not just a job that I have to earn a living. I care about doing the best job I can every day for all my students. I care about helping other teachers. I care about letting other know what teachers know.

*You see writing as a crucial part of*

*the Teacher Research process. Why is this so important?*

I actually see writing as a critical part of the learning process. I believe that writing helps TRs see what they have learned. Through the composing process, TRs find new questions, new ideas, and grapple with thoughts they hadn't considered before. Writing lets you take a look at your thinking over time and notice changes. It lets you explore an idea and then be able to set it aside and come back to that same wording later when your thinking has already changed. (I think the same process also works for students.)

*What are your future goals for SDAWP's Teacher Research group?*

MORE PUBLISHING! I would love to see SDAWP TRs put together some kind of book for teachers in our area. We have learned a lot—I'd like to share what we have learned.

The San Diego Area Writing Project is entering its seventh year supporting teachers as they inquire into teaching and learning in their own classrooms. Teacher research study groups provide a powerful forum for dialogue and broaden the understanding of reflective practice. We support anywhere from six to 20 teachers each year in a variety of grade levels (K-university) and from schools all over San Diego County. This year we have expanded our support of teachers in the county by encouraging our writing project fellows who are teacher researchers to invite a colleague to join them in the teacher research experience. As a result, this year we have four new teachers (with less than three years of teaching) in our group. Their involvement in TR seems to be very positive for them—and they bring a new energy to the group as well. This is our final year of a Spencer Foundation Grant which has funded travel to conferences to present our TR, provided release time for TRs, allowed us to pay stipends to TRs, supported our publication of this special edition of the *Dialogue*, and may still support a small writing retreat.



# Calendar of Events

## Summer Invitational Institute

June 24 - July 24, 2003 UCSD

## Open Institutes at UCSD

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## What About Writing? K-8

July 28 - August 1, 2003

## Assessment, Assessment, Assessment

July 28 - August 1, 2003

For information,  
contact the SDAWP office,  
at (858) 534-2576  
or email [cschrammel@ucsd.edu](mailto:cschrammel@ucsd.edu)

## California Writing Project Fall Conference *Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools*

October 3-4, 2003  
Sacramento Holiday Inn  
Capitol Plaza  
<http://csmc.ucop.edu/cwp>

## The Center for Anti-Oppressive Education Special Three-Day Institute for Teacher Educators

San Francisco Airport Marriott Hotel,  
August 11-15, 2003  
For information please visit  
<http://antioppressiveeducation.org>

## San Diego Area Writing Project

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### Visit our website at

<http://create.ucsd.edu/sdawp/>

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