Practicing Research by Researching Practice

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At the June, 1981 Conference on **Literacy in the 1980's** sponsored by The University of Michigan's English Composition Board, a group of us, all teachers, spent three afternoons together doing research about our practice. On the first afternoon after preliminary discussion, we decided to study students' experience of "coming to class unprepared." Using ourselves as informants for the study, each of us thought back to a time when he or she had been an unprepared student, and we each wrote a description of what had happened. We reflected upon what we had done and how we had felt. Then together we analyzed these descriptions by looking for common themes among them. We found some important ones: feeling uncertain and nervous; wanting to avoid going to class; avoiding eye contact with the teacher; waiting for time to pass, ever so slowly; and experiencing relief at escaping detection if, indeed, we "escaped" detection; or suffering embarrassment if, in fact, we were "caught." There were also interesting and significant variations in our individual descriptions. After we had identified these variations, we focused our attention upon what could be done to help students in our classes profit from a lesson even when they were unprepared for it.

Our discussion immediately led to disagreement about whether fear, embarrassment, and avoidance in such cases are counter productive or whether these reactions in students could be used to motivate their performance. Our differing interpretations of the impact of fear, embarrassment, and avoidance upon learning arose from our different teaching philosophies--I recall one participant saying, "Education isn't therapy," in the midst of a discussion that took for granted it was. Our differing interpre-

tations also arose from our personal experiences of being unprepared. Some of us had grown thick skins; others thin ones.

The group effort in which we teachers were engaging is educational research. We were studying an educational experience from the point of view of individuals who lived through it. And whatever else education is, it is most importantly individuals' experience. It was experience we found easy to reflect upon because we were examining something all but one of us[1] had lived through ourselves and furthermore it was experience in which we all had an interest.

Research

The word research comes from the French rechercher, to look again, carefully; to examine things closely. How one does research is always a matter for choosing. The choice is influenced--or should be--by what is being studied. It is not surprising that different academic disciplines have become associated with different research traditions for the research which scholars within the different disciplines choose to do is defined itself by the subjects they research. For example, astronomers and ethologists choose to observe the subjects of their research while physicists and chemists experiment with the subject of their re-

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[1] The one person who had herself no memory of ever coming to class unprepared wrote a description of two students who were chronically unprepared in her class. Her account of her students behavior shared a great deal with the recollections from the rest of us and served to strengthen our understanding of the analysis we had done.

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search and biologists classify the subjects of their research. If we accept this lesson from the natural sciences which demonstrates that the method of research is determined by the subject being studied then we accept the premise that for every research question the important prior question is: What should we be studying? What is important enough to us that we would take the trouble to examine it more closely. Because we cannot study all that occurs, we must make choices. If we are to be effective researchers, we will choose methods designed to help us discover more about the events or problems of the subjects we choose to study. Our methods follow from our problems. Problems will not follow from methods--at least they should not.

One way to choose what is important enough to study is to do as my colleagues and I did in June, 1982, to discuss a number of puzzling things that happen in classrooms and chose one to examine--one that intrigues us. Research which begins with a problem researchers choose is unlikely to be dull or irrelevant; interesting research flows from researchers' choice of a real problem.

It is a sad paradox that topics of concern to teachers are often believed by those same teachers to be of little importance because the problems cannot be studied "scientifically"--where scientifically is taken to mean according to scientific method. This belief that scientific method is the arbiter of what is significant is as pervasive as the myths which surround literacy that Jay Robinson writes about in his essay in this first issue. The myth of the primacy of scientific method should not inhibit practitioners from going ahead with research. There is no such thing as the scientific method. We come to believe in the unfortunate fairy tale of the scientific method in elementary and secondary school when we study "science." We begin to revere the illusion when we learn just enough about research design and statistics in college to know that we don't understand them. Then that realm, the scientific one, becomes the mystical province of experts, and those experts seem to be the only ones who know those topics important enough to be the subjects of research.

Science is, in fact, a great variety of traditions to which we are able to give a single name, but to which we are unable to give a single definition. I think of science as [the body of knowledge] that results when critical minds attempt to understand important puzzling problems. My view of science has much in common with my view of rhetoric: The task of both is to explore and understand something well enough to describe it accurately to others. If scientists' or rhetoricians' audiences remain unconvinced of the claims made to them, they can use the scientific or rhetorical accounts of those claims to check up on the evidence or arguments presented in them and see for themselves. True scientific methods are the methods used to reduce puzzlement.

This view of science is not universally accepted. One need only look at the methodologically complex but uninteresting articles which fill the educational research journals. These are studies whose importance lies more in their methodological sophistication than in the practical significance of their results. I believe the studies are like this because too many social scientists are absolutely convinced that there is a scientific method; that they know what it is; and that they have an obligation to impose it on the rest of us. These same social scientists often control editorial boards of educational research journals. However their power to dictate one vision of science does not change the fact that science is a human enterprise which means that individuals always choose problems to study and methods to study them--and these choices, even in the most rigorous of the sciences, are not themselves scientific. This focus on method has allowed a gulf to develop between research and practice. However, it is not a necessary gulf. It can be overcome if practitioners assert their right to choose problems of practice as legitimate problems and--for education--necessary problems in

the scientific enterprise. It can be overcome if practitioners and researchers would recognize each other as legitimate partners and—for education—necessary partners in the scientific enterprise.

By researching and writing about practice, researchers and practitioners can focus attention upon the practice studied, and thereby those practices become important. If teachers ever wish to get their agenda of problems before a wider audience, they must start studying what intrigues them. That is how science works. The scientific enterprise is very much a human enterprise, a social enterprise. Paired associate learning and serial position effects became important after they were studied, not before. Why shouldn't practitioners be able to turn their real concerns into interesting problems for study and discussion?

This vision of a practical social science or what I prefer to call a human science approach differs in important ways from the stereotypical viewpoint about scientific study which pervades the so called social sciences. I shall briefly describe some of the differences here. First from the viewpoint of social science, all research must strive to be objective which means that researchers must try to disappear behind the methods used. Every study done in this way should be, in the ideal, like every other one. The result is that social science appears to be impersonal, almost automatic. From the human science viewpoint, investigators strive to be fair and honest about what is done, why and what the results of research mean, but they do not attempt to vanish behind methods. They acknowledge that science is always done by individuals with personal interests, that science is not the result of an anonymous process; and, that it is, therefore, all right to say "I"—and a silly charade to hide behind "the researcher"—in reporting the results.

Second, in the social sciences, researchers always try to measure treatments and outcomes in numerical values. In the human sciences, ordinary language is the

preferred mode of communication. Third, in the social sciences prediction is the goal. In the human sciences, the goal is understanding and appreciation of individuals' situations. Fourth, in the social sciences results are supposed to be generalizable; they should apply beyond the situation studied. Many of the elaborate procedures used in research—sampling, control, measurement—are specifically chosen to make this generalization possible. In the human sciences since understanding and not generalization is the goal, there is no need to construct procedures to amplify the importance of findings. Readers must decide for themselves whether results are likely to apply beyond the situation studied.

Fifth, in the social sciences the outcome sought is a clear, certain "yes" or "no" answer to a particular issue. Hypotheses are framed and procedures developed to give a single response to a carefully framed question. Research design and statistics training can be viewed as enculturation to a world which constructs simple research questions, designed to give solutions once and forever to complex issues of everyday life. This practice is a radical rejection of the ever changing nature of human experience. In the human sciences instead of simple results and clear answers, researchers usually emerge from their studies with a complex understanding of what is going on. The more they learn about situations, the more complicated those situations tend to become. Results are always tenative; there is always more to be learned. Although such research can be frustrating, it is seldom boring or irrelevant.

Sixth, the human science vision differs from the typical social science one because it asks itself to be useful. The goal of human science study is understanding which may be of earthly use to someone. In the social sciences that need not be the case. In current social science practice there continues to be a distinction between basic studies done without regard to their potential utility and applied studies which seek uses for

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results from basic research. In the past this cart-before-the-horse procedure has resulted in teaching machines, classroom behavior modification techniques, and similar irrelevancies.

The need for human science research in which practitioners become researchers is great, but practical obstacles to research by teachers is equally great. The principal one is lack of time. I marvel at the ability of concientious high school composition teachers to survive the killing load of classes and papers in a normal school week. I am sure the task is not easier in other subjects. In the interest of our profession's need for important meaningful research, perhaps time can be found for teacher-oriented and teacher-directed research if the usual in-service programs with their complement of outside experts could be changed to programs for teacher self-service when colleagues could gather together as we did last spring in Ann Arbor to investigate problems of practice.

In fact, useful research need not take a great amount of time. During the last academic year several members of the English Composition Board staff met bimonthly for hour-and-a-half meetings to study our reading and evaluation of student essays. Initially we intended to meet only once, but the dimensions of our interests soon convinced us that we should meet again and then again. In addition, and not at all irrelevantly, we found our work together interesting, stimulating, and fun.

The problem we studied was one which has been discussed continually since the beginning of the English Composition Board's program, one which has occupied our attention as we have assessed in excess of 20,000 entrance essays and countless student papers--what we do when we read student essays. We thought if we read together informally but independently--in contrast to the times when we must read and train together formally--and then examined from close at hand our judgments of each essay, we might develop a better understanding of how our complex decisions are actually made.

Our procedures were simple. We all read the same essays chosen from among past essays written in response to the English Composition Board's entrance essay requirement. Separately, we evaluated the essays, giving them a score from "1"--exceptional, meaning exempt from introductory composition, to "4"--weak, meaning needs to take a special seven-week tutorial course in writing and then to repeat the exam. As each reader reported on his or her reasons for the score he or she gave a paper, the rest of us took note of the important statements characterizing the judgment.

After reading three or four essays, we recorded important recurring statements on the blackboard so we could consider them--what they had in common and how they differed. Initially, vocabulary posed interesting problems. As we discussed the essays we discovered that several of us were using different terms for a single concept. Also, we found that on occasion we were using a single term for different concepts. Sorting out our terminology and agreeing on definitions for the words we used to describe aspects of the essays became an important part of our research. We had assumed that "flow" meant the same thing to everyone in the group. It was intriguing--and useful--to find that it did not. By questioning, defining, and redefining recurring terms as we put them to use describing the essays we studied, we were able to bring our judgments of problematic essays into closer agreement than had been possible before.

Moreover, we recognized that there was more to our decisions than judging the essay at hand. We found that in our discussion of essays, we were often looking for the student writers behind the essays. While comments like, "I think this is a solid '2' essay," were frequent, comments like, "This student will do just fine in comp," were equally frequent or perhaps more frequent. We were not content to judge only the essay; we were trying to make decisions about the person who wrote it. Not only were we reflecting our commitment to place students in settings where they would receive appro-

priate instruction, but we were also re-vealing something—and I'm not sure what to name it—at the center of the process of judging essays. We were reading, mind-ful that these essays were written in 50 minutes by entering students in a testing situation in response to a fixed topic and for a given audience: We were reading contextually. In so doing, we found that reading is always an interpretive process, an act of re-creation of the writer's circumstance by the reader. As we read we asked ourselves, experienced teachers of composition, to consider how "for-giving" we ought to be and how to "for-give" accurately—yet consistently.

We discussed the advice that social sci-entists offer us: Identify clear cri-teria and apply only those criteria dur-ing the evaluation process in order to attain higher reliability coefficients. We asked others—some beyond our campus—who are expert in judging essays to join us and share their thoughts about these matters with us. We evaluated holistic evaluation procedures themselves. In the process—which is where one usually is in human science research—we decided once again there are no easy solutions. How-ever, we had renewed our own interest in the hard, unresolved issues we face when we judge writing, issues which are not unique to our circumstance; issues which arise whenever interpretation of the mean-ings and intentions of others is called for; issues which differ in kind but not in principle from the interpretive acts of anthropologists and literary critics. By researching circumstances contextually we had come to see that context more comprehensively.

There is an irony here that should be noted. We were covering ground which others had talked about—some of them to us. But reading about or being told is always a little abstracted from the situ-ation. Doing the analysis for oneself makes the writings of others relevant, clearer, and more useful. To do research is to engage in dialogue with others who have considered similar problems. In the doing one becomes more aware both of the issues and of who one's colleagues are.

I don't think our experiences were at all unusual. The more we tried to understand, the more we learned about ourselves as readers, about the dimenisions of the problem and about what was still unclear. And these new questions led us to con-tinue our meetings for an entire year—to continue to look from a new perspective at an issue which has always concerned teachers of writing—and to invite other experienced teachers of writing to read with us. As we proceeded, we became much more certain both of the central criteria by which we judge essays and of the dif-ficulty of specifying exactly how these criteria fit together in deciding about a particular essay. But the specific re-sults of our research are not the subject of this paper. This is only an example to illustrate the power, the fascination, and the intellectual interest which comes from a reflective turn of mind toward practice. What began for us as a commit-ment to one meeting became a year's work.

But not really work, rather I would call it an opportunity. An opportunity to see that our practical problem was in fact an intellectually challenging puzzle of the first order which was able not only to engage us but had occupied others as well. An experience like ours could convince us teachers that our work is actually important.

It would take only the commitment of a small portion of time for a faculty group to become its own research group studying those aspects of practice which seem in-tractible. I doubt that difficult, long time problems can be solved in the sense of finding a solution of which others can then be informed. The "solution" rather resides in the process of study itself which can invigorate, inform and enliven practice. Our world as teachers is im-portant. Our problems are of broad in-terest and significance. There is no better way to realize this than to take time to study them for ourselves.