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ABSTRACT

When a university educator reflected upon her experience as a teacher of preservice English teachers, she concluded that integrating action research into three courses and an internship assignment can be effective, and perhaps, more effective than a separate, theoretical course in action research itself. Most educators agree that action research is a valuable type of research, that research conducted by teachers in their own classrooms is meaningful, and that it is the most effective strategy for bringing about change in the classroom. The courses in question were: Young Adult Literature, Theory and Practice of Composition, and Methods and Materials for the Secondary Teacher of English Language Arts. In each course, students followed four basic steps: (1) they assumed the role of teacher, working with one or more students in a secondary English classroom; (2) they observed, collected data, and took notes; (3) they reflected; and (4) they drew conclusions about what they learned and considered the implications for their own classrooms. Appendixes contain course assignments and internship assignment. (NKA)

Improving Classroom Practice: Inviting Undergraduates to Become Teacher Researchers

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In 1982, Nancie Atwell called for universities and State Departments of Education to include teacher-researcher courses in their certification programs. But, even now in 1999, the terms teacher-researcher and action research have various definitions and connotations. To some it may mean teachers informally discussing classroom practices, sharing what works and what doesn't. To others it is a more structured way of collecting data, looking for patterns or trends, and revising practices accordingly. But most educators will agree it is a valuable type of research, that research conducted by teachers in their own classrooms is meaningful and that it is the most effective strategy for bringing about change in the classroom. I agree and believe action research as an important part of a preservice teacher's professional development. During the last academic year, I incorporated an action research requirement into three courses I teach at a state university in the undergraduate program in English Language Arts Education. Young Adult Literature, Theory and Practice of Composition, and Methods and Materials for the Secondary Teacher of English Language Arts as well as their internship provided the settings for these assignments. In each course students follow four basic steps: (1) they assume the role of teacher, working with one or more students in a secondary English classroom, (2) they observe, collect data, and take notes, (3) they reflect, (4) they draw conclusions about what they learned and consider the implications for their own classrooms.

Young Adult Literature

During Winter Quarter, 1999, eleven students were enrolled in Young Adult Literature; they participated in a dialogue journal exchange via Email with students at the local middle school. Their assignment was to motivate a seventh grade student to develop an interest in reading by introducing and recommending young adult literature

(see Appendix A). They sent a total of six messages, the first one being an introduction where they talked about themselves and asked questions to determine their partner's reading interests and attitude toward reading. Based upon the response from their middle school partners, they sent a series of messages recommending specific young adult novels. Throughout the quarter, they kept a learning log, analyzing what they did and what they learned from this experience. At the end of the quarter, they wrote a reflective paper identifying what they learned about a seventh grader's reading habits and interests as well as what they learned about themselves as teachers. They submitted their learning logs along with the paper, highlighting those segments which they used as the basis for their conclusions.

Each college student worked with a different seventh grader, but it was not unusual to find similar conclusions in their papers. Several submitted findings about seventh grade reading habits which were quite positive: their students liked to read, had good reading skills, could talk easily about their books in writing, and apparently had a strong family support system. Other conclusions were less encouraging: these seventh graders did not like to read, did not respond to their Email partners, and did not even attempt to read the recommended novels. When they analyzed reading interests, they concluded that seventh graders liked adventure, mystery, and humor, and almost all of them liked the series books by R. L. Stine.

The college students also learned about themselves as teachers. Jackie admitted that she had been thinking in a stereotypical way, assuming a boy would only want to read action stories, focusing on heroes, not heroines. Leanne learned that teachers need to acknowledge students' suggestions and read the books they recommend. Annette concluded that she needed to pay more attention to student interests and use that as a starting place. Diane admitted quite honestly that she had become impatient and frustrated when her student did not respond to her suggestions. During class discussion they generally agreed that finding the right book for individual students is a difficult and challenging task.

Theory and Practice of Composition

During Spring Quarter, 1999, twelve students were enrolled in Theory and Practice of Composition. A cooperating teacher from an area high school agreed to supply compositions written by her 10th grade English class; they were working on the following assignment: "Write either a cause or an effect paper with one documented source." She was particularly concerned that her class learn to use evidence based on research along with appropriate in-text citation. Student compositions, still in the drafting stage, were delivered to the college classroom, and each student was assigned two 10th grade writers. They read the drafts and provided a written response, suggesting how the papers might be improved. The drafts and comments were returned to the high school, and, after several weeks, we received the final papers with an analytic rating scale for evaluation.

Based upon this experience, I asked them to write a reflective paper analyzing what they had learned about teaching composition as well as the implications for their own classrooms (see Appendix B). As I read their papers, I found much consensus in what they had discovered. They identified similar weaknesses in the students' writing. Lack of documentation skills and sparse development of ideas were the two elements cited most frequently. Other weaknesses involved problems with thesis statements, mechanics, and fluency. Several concluded, when they evaluated the final papers, that the students had not paid attention to suggestions they had provided.

They also acknowledged their own weaknesses as teachers. Several found it hard to advise and evaluate students they had never met, and one admitted it was very difficult to get past proofreading and respond to the content of the paper. When they considered the implications for their own classrooms, they agreed that teacher-student conferences were more effective than written comments when teaching composition. Several referred to the importance of teachers and students communicating face to face. Based upon the weaknesses in the papers, they concluded that students need more explanations and examples of the skills which are required for a particular

assignment and that these students needed more practice with thesis statements, documentation, and using evidence for support.

They decided that certain strategies work best when responding to student writing: teachers should ask questions instead of giving directions, avoid overwhelming the student with too many corrections, teach mechanics in the context of student writing, and focus on revising, not proofreading. They also looked at the assignment, itself, and suggested ways to improve it. Sensing a lack of interest or motivation on the part of the student writers, they recommended more student input in choice of mode or topic. Because the analytic scale, in many cases, did not seem to provide the grade a paper really deserved, they recommended a holistic approach to evaluation.

Methods and Materials for the Secondary Teacher of English Language Arts

During Fall Quarter, 1998, eight students were enrolled in Methods and Materials for the Secondary Teacher of English Language Arts. Each student spent 5 days in a secondary classroom, observing and teaching at least one class. Before entering the classroom, they developed a research question which would be the focus of both their observations and teaching experiences. Each day they kept a learning log with two columns: (1) a description of what they did and (2) notes on what they learned. Students used their learning logs to write an essay, reflecting on their experience in the classroom and the implications for them as teachers (see Appendix C).

In their final papers, four of the eight students researched some aspect of the writing process: they wanted to discover how students can become aware of the importance of writing or how it can be taught most effectively. They based their findings on observation of the teacher, their own teaching experience, or a combination of these two factors. They concluded that the teachers' strategies were too traditional and teacher-centered, that students need to become more involved and independent, choosing their own topics, keeping journals, and writing for different audiences. Betty analyzed her own teaching experience and decided that secondary English students will be motivated to write if the assignment relates to their own lives. Jeanne looked at both her observation of the teacher and her own teaching experience and concluded that textbook exercises are useless and "the best way to teach grammar is through writing."

The four remaining students focused on more global issues for their research. Marie wanted to discover how to make learning in the language arts classroom "fun and innovative for the students." She described a successful teaching experience using newspapers and collaborative learning groups to teach the elements of a short story and concluded that "when students are not having fun they are not interested in what is going on around them." Sarah started with the question "Is discipline a barrier to learning in nontraditionally structured classrooms?" She focused her observations on two disinterested students and concluded that "not only does a nontraditional setting foster better behavior, but it also encourages students to participate in class activities." Janette asked "How do we use the time available to us for maximum effect?" Based upon her observations of a literature class, she recommended specific strategies to keep students focused on their assignments and prepare them for class discussion. Jeanne wondered how a teacher can "involve students in the world around them . . .how they are affected by society and how they . . . can influence their world." Based upon her observation of two teachers who involved students in authentic learning experiences, she concluded that if teachers are positive, creative, and look outside the classroom for inspiration, they can develop students who are critical thinkers.

While students were enrolled in the Methods class, they developed two tentative research questions for their internship and possible procedures for gathering information. Most of their questions evolved from their five-day research assignment in the classroom. Several planned to focus on effective procedures for teaching composition:

What should I ask writers to produce in terms of quantity and genres?

How do I make writing more relevant to students' lives?

How can instruction in grammar be made fun and interesting to students?

Others wanted to research procedures for teaching literature:

How can I motivate students to become more interested in reading?

How can I assess students' reading so it reflects what I ask of readers, doesn't create competition, and makes sense to parents and students?

How can I teach students to like the classics?

Several looked at overall classroom strategies:

What are the most effective ways to handle discipline problems in the classroom?

How can students be challenged without being over their heads?

How can I encourage students to read and write for purposes other than a grade?

They suggested methods of collecting data to answer their questions:

Most indicated they would try several different teaching strategies, then observe and evaluate the results.

Others indicated that they would observe a selected group of students, develop pre- and post-surveys, interview other teachers, and keep a journal or learning log to record their successful moments and frustrations.

Internship

During Winter and Spring Quarters, 1999, five students completed their internships. Although all of these students had completed the three-course sequence, none had completed all three the previous year when I was emphasizing and requiring experiences in action research. However, they were all familiar with the concept and agreed to become teacher-researchers during their internship (see Appendix D). The five interns developed questions or topics as the basis for their research, and several indicated how they would collect the data.

Heather's question was "How can I present lessons that will show the importance of the English language after graduation?" She planned to learn from experienced teachers, readings, and observation of students. Since she was teaching seniors who were about to graduate, she believed lack of motivation was a particularly serious problem. She, therefore, decided to develop lessons with a clear focus on skills and knowledge which they could use after graduation. When she taught composition, the class wrote "thank-you notes" for graduation gifts and for employers who might offer them an interview. When they studied pronoun usage, they brainstormed the types of situations which called for formal English and those which might allow informal usage. She told them about her own interviews and the importance of correct English. When she taught literature, she looked for themes that would relate to their lives. *The Giver* by Lois Lowry was especially effective because of its emphasis on freedom of choice. Heather focused her observations on four boys she identified as "reluctant learners." Based on their response in class and on their written assignments, she concluded that her strategies were effective. She did not, however, supply any data to support this conclusion other than her learning logs.

Troy wanted to discover how to motivate students to learn. He planned to reflect on his own high school experience, writing down everything he remembered about strategies that had worked for him. He would also

"find some books on the subject." Both his learning log and his reflective paper were a description of events in his classroom; they lacked focus and several seemed unrelated to motivation. He talked about submitting compositions for a writing contest, assigning a career portfolio for non-college bound students, a classroom controversy concerning whether or not students could use notes for their test, using popular music to introduce poetry, and relating historical background to literature. I re-read his entries and detected a common thread; he continually emphasized that such activities could prevent problems from occurring in the classroom. He had originally considered two research questions: one was how to motivate and the other was how to gain students' respect which he believed was the key to preventing discipline problems. I had encouraged him to investigate motivation, but it was clear from his notes that his real interest was in avoiding classroom disruptions and controversies.

Rob's question was "How can I make my class more student-centered?" His plan was to "incorporate student-centered activities as time permits and take careful notes." That little phrase, "as time permits," proved to be highly significant in his research. The first time I observed his class, I thought "How ironic!" Rob chose to research a student-centered classroom, but his lesson was one of the most teacher-centered that I had ever observed. I found the answer in his learning log. In each entry, he paid tribute to his cooperating teacher as an excellent teacher, but one who was very traditional in methods and one who expected him to follow her procedures and to "cover" specific information in the text. As a result, he had little opportunity to develop the student-centered classroom he had anticipated. The last time I observed his classroom, he was analyzing poetry. He provided no time for the students to respond to a poem or even to read through an entire poem even once before he began explaining. Rob simply did a line-by-line analysis for them and then moved on to the next poem that he was obliged to cover. According to his learning log, he did try to incorporate other kinds of activities: he used journal entries in one class and a reader-response type writing assignment in another. He believed both assignments worked well and that students enjoyed and appreciated them. By the end of his reflective paper he decided that it was probably good for him to work with a traditional teacher and experience such an approach and that a combination of lecture and student-centered activities is best. At the beginning of the quarter, I urged interns to talk to their cooperating teachers about their research, to secure their approval, and to invite them to collaborate if they were interested. Although Rob had his teacher's approval, it was clear that there was no real opportunity for him to conduct his research.

Jennifer's topic was how to handle discipline. She planned to observe other teachers and to try various approaches in her own classes and note results. Her learning logs and reflective papers were the most clearly focused of all the interns. If students were inattentive while she was reading to them, she would call on them by name and ask a question about the material. She found this to be more effective than "calling them down." She prepared a box with an index card for each student. Any time a student misbehaved, she would pull his/her card and record the incident. She explained to the students that three "write-downs" meant an office referral. She claimed that this worked well, and that eventually just seeing the box seemed to have a positive effect on most students. She emphasized the importance of being consistent, but noted that it can cause problems. When a good student breaks a rule, he/she must be punished in exactly the same way that constant trouble-makers are punished. She also noted the problem of discrimination--that black students tended to label a teacher as racist if she punished more black than white students. She pondered: "Do I have to punish an equal number of whites and blacks to avoid this problem?" Jennifer also observed the classrooms of those teachers she identified as "veterans." She was continuously impressed by and somewhat envious of their lack of discipline problems, but she was not able to analyze just what they were doing to prevent problems. She wondered if she might have to grow old before she gained respect.

Stephanie, after talking with her cooperating teacher, developed her research question: "How can I help students to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and ideas clearly, confidently, and effectively?" Her learning logs document various strategies which she used in her classes. For example, she explained to her students that they would help each other be better communicators. When a student spoke in class, but his/her meaning was not

clear, Stephanie, as teacher, would ask questions trying to clarify the intent of the speaker. And the students, in turn, would do the same for her. Anytime they did not understand, they could stop the lesson, ask questions, and she would explain. When they wrote dialogue journals talking about the novels they were reading, she responded to each entry, asking questions and encouraging them to talk more specifically about their books. For her research data she cited dialogue journals, records of conversations, both teacher-to-student and student-to-student, as well as the journal prompts. She concluded that students were making progress and decided that in her own classroom students would write daily, either journals or free writings and that she would require standard English at all times.

Reflections

At the end of the year it was my turn to analyze the data and reflect upon what I had learned. I had learning logs and reflective papers as well as my observations of the interns' classrooms. First, I realized that I need to revise my directions and procedures. Interns must be allowed to follow their own interests in developing a topic for research. Troy's concern in regard to gaining students' respect and, thereby, preventing discipline problems, led him to focus on this topic even though he had agreed to research motivation. I need to try harder to include the cooperating teacher in a collaborative research project, thereby avoiding the dilemma which Rob faced when he tried to develop a student-centered classroom. I plan to structure the internship assignment more carefully, requiring a tentative plan for carrying out the research and additional data beyond the learning logs to support their conclusions. Also, I will provide the opportunity for them to read first person accounts of teacher research in professional journals, accounts such as those listed in Appendix E. I will also ask several of these students to come back next year to talk to my methods class about their research experience and to discuss any action research they may be initiating in their own classes.

As I reflect upon my experience last year as a teacher of preservice English teachers, I believe that integrating action research into three courses and an internship assignment can be as effective and, perhaps, more effective that a separate, theoretical course in action research itself. Although the intern's final research projects were lacking in many ways--they were carried out sporadically and the collection of data was weak--I am hopeful that their in-class experiences as well as their internship assignment have established the habit of looking for answers in their own classrooms, that they will recognize this is part of their professional development. However, I need to continue my own research. As students enroll in this cycle of courses and complete these assignments, I plan to survey them after graduation to see if action research has become a part of their teaching strategy.

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Appendix A

Young Adult Literature

Your goal is to motivate a seventh grade student to develop an interest in reading by introducing

and recommending young adult literature.

1. Send five (5) messages via e-mail to your student/partner at Charles Henderson Middle School

Address: midsch@trojan.troyst.edu

Subject: student's name

CC: mtighe@trojan.troyst.edu

Message: See guidelines below Sign your name at the end of the message

2. Guidelines:

Your goal is to interests your students in reading, so, first of all, you need to discover their interests, to learn about the books they have been reading, and to determine whether or not they like to read. Then, over the course of the next seven weeks, recommend five books which you have selected for them, one per Email message. Read the book carefully; then tell them enough to interest them in reading the book but not enough to spoil it for them. Set up a reasonable schedule for your student to read and respond to your five recommendations. Ask the students to respond by a certain date, but keep sending messages even if they do not answer.

As you select books, include at least one multicultural author. Keep a list of the titles and authors of the books you recommend and identify the genres for your own information. To receive credit for this assignment, be sure to send a carbon copy of the 5 Email messages to mtighe@trojan.troyst.edu

3. Keep a learning log in which you reflect upon what you are learning about seventh graders and their reading interests, skills, and abilities. Be sure to date each entry. Make two columns in your learning log as indicated below:

What I observed What I Learned

4. Based upon your learning log where you reflected upon your Email messages to and from a middle school student, what have you learned about seventh graders and their reading interests, skills, and abilities? What have you learned about the teacher's role in developing reading interests and abilities? Consider what you observed and what you learned; then record this information in an organized essay.

Highlight the sections in your learning log that are the basis for the conclusions you have drawn. Submit your learning log along with your essay.

Appendix B

Theory and Practice of Composition

Imagine that you are an inexperienced English teacher being interviewed by a high school principal for a position to teach ninth grade English. The principal wants a writing sample, so he asks you to prepare a paper for him, discussing any concrete experiences you have had in teaching composition. You decide to use your experience

responding to and evaluating the papers from Jeff Davis High School. Describe the experience; tell what you did, what you learned, and how you will apply this knowledge in your own classroom.

- Persona: English teacher (recent graduate with no teaching experience)
- Audience: High school principal
- Purpose: To inform and convince that your are prepared to teach composition effectively

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Appendix C

Methods and Materials for the Secondary Teacher of English Language Arts

As a part of your course work in ENG 481/581, Methods and Materials for the Secondary Teacher of English and Language Arts, you are required to observe and participate for five full days in a junior or senior high English class. Participate in your assigned classroom through observation and selected teaching tasks. Arrange with your cooperating teacher to teach at least one class period during the five days. Be sure to discuss the plan with your teacher and revise if needed.

As you complete your observation and teaching assignment, you should complete 5 learning logs and a reflective paper. Nancie Atwell (1998), the author of In the Middle: New Understandings about Writing, Reading, and Learning, makes the following claim: "I begin by looking at my students as teachers who will instruct me about their lives" (p. 55). As you spend five days in the classroom, think about what your students are teaching you. First, develop a question which you will try to answer through your observations and teaching experiences. Then, become a careful observer of an entire class, a group of students, or one individual student. Keep a daily learning log for each of the five days, taking notes on what you are learning from your students. Use the notes from your learning logs to write a reflective paper which seeks to answer your question.

Five Learning Log

Use the following format to take notes on each of the five days you are in the classroom to fulfill your clinical observation requirements.

Name _____ Date _____

School _____ Time of arrival _____

Cooperating Teacher _____ Time of departure _____

Grade(s) _____

What did you do? observe? teach? What did you learn and how did you learn it?

Reflective Paper

Your reflective paper should include the following parts:

1. Identify the question you investigated. Why is it an important question for English teachers? Why is it especially important to you?
2. Characterize the individual or group you observed/taught.

3. Describe what you observed, experienced, and or taught in the classroom that helped to answer your question.
4. Discuss the conclusions you came to at the end of 5 days. How would you now answer your original questions?

Appendix D

Internship

Action Research Learning Logs

Do you remember Nancie Atwell's quote? She claims that "I begin by looking at my students as teachers who will instruct me about their lives" (p. 55). During your internship, think about what your students are teaching you. First, develop a question which you will try to answer through your observations and teaching experiences. Then, become a careful observer of an entire class, a group of students, or one individual student. Keep a weekly learning log, taking notes on what you are learning from your students.

First Week of Internship

Write a paragraph in which you identify the question or concern that you will research during your internship. Explain how you plan to collect information in your classroom. Consider what the students read, write, say, or do as well as your own careful observations and notes. Be sure to discuss your research plans with your cooperating teacher.

Weekly Reports during Internship

Use the following format to take notes each week of your internship.

Name _____ Week (begin & end) _____

What did you do, observe, or teach What did you learn? How did you in regard to your research? learn it?

(Be sure to make a copy of each week's learning log for your own reference. You will need these notes for your reflective paper.)

Final Week of Internship

Use the notes in your learning logs to write a reflective paper, explaining what you learned and how you learned it. Your final reflective paper should include the following parts:

1. Identify the question you investigated. Why is it an important question for English teachers? Why is it especially important to you?
2. Characterize the individual or group you observed and taught.
3. Describe what you observed, experienced, and or taught in the classroom that helped to answer your question.
4. Explain how you collected data for analysis.
5. Discuss your conclusions. How will this influence you in your own classroom?
6. Attach supporting data.

Appendix E

Action Research References for Undergraduates

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