Edifying Action And Site-based Action Research

By Jim Parsons and Phil McRae

Faculty of Education

University of Alberta

jim.parsons@ualberta.ca

Introduction

The title of this conference is "From Theory to Methodology" and the call was for papers that demonstrated the application of values theories and ethical models as conceptual frameworks in support of both qualitative and quantitative research. This paper is presented with particular attention to the conference theme "Metaphors and Methodologies: The Moral Contexts of Research and Practice." Specifically, we are interested in how engaging in research impacts those who engage in it, how they are changed, and how their identities, and those of their colleagues, might be shaped because of this engagement. More specifically, we are interested in these questions at the graduate level – in other words, how does engaging in site-based, action-oriented graduate research shape graduate students' insights and identities?

We came to this interest as we witnessed graduate students fully-engaged in our Faculty of Education's Masters of Educational Studies (MES) program change how they came to see their work and themselves. To cut to the chase, as a long-serving academic, Jim has taught thirty-two years at the University of Alberta, and has been moved to theorize as a result of two chronologically corresponding (and not wholly by accident) activities – our MES program [Jim is the Director and creator of this program] and the western Canadian province of Alberta's educational decision to engage teachers and school administrators at the grassroots level in site-based, school improvement research projects [Phil is now the Director of this project for the University of Alberta]. Here we have worked with teachers and school districts as agents of the University of Alberta as they built, conducted, and reported their site-based research projects]. (These projects, titled the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement [AISI] will be explained later in the paper.)

As a result of our engagement in both these activities, we have come to see research as a uniquely creatively and empowering activity for those who engage fully in it. We have also come to create a small cosmology of how our MES program and Alberta's AISI work are enmeshed in the complexities of action research: this cosmology is summed in three concepts – (1) community, (2) agency, and (3) service. We offer a caveat at the

beginning that this paper represents "rough-draft" thinking about this area and we have used this occasion as a way to explore what we believe is a fundamental question for the academy – especially as the academy comes to more fully engage and support e-learning approaches and alternative-delivery graduate programs.

Background

We believe research is more than systematically collecting data to inform educational change. It is, in fact, a theory of knowledge construction, a discourse-creating act, and thus a site for the contestation of power. In this light, site-based action research for our graduate students and the teachers of Alberta who have worked within the AISI projects, becomes the activities of practitioners who no longer are engaged in "packaged" experience, but are now experiencing for the first time. Thus, for such practitioner researchers who have connected their vocation and their research in really obvious ways, research becomes a way of acting ethically within an educational community that positions leadership within a teacher's role as shaping spaces for learning through empowering localized and 'ethical' activities of research. Such ethical action also (re)shapes the school culture and wider learning community within which the research is being conducted. In this way, the individual and collective are impacted in a myriad of powerful ways by the site-based research.

Philosophically, these research activities also become sites of contestation over how knowledge is and should be constructed and controlled. In other words, and we have seen this within our own students' research, their work has challenged traditional ideas of research that can be found almost uncritically embedded philosophically within such normative organizational research documents as Research Ethics Forms and bound within the way differing organizations have historically related to each other. For example, research within the geographical proximity to the University of Alberta has been wholly directed by the University – and not directed by the large urban school districts that surround the University. These research relationships have not been truly engaged partnerships – though the work done has been formally named 'cooperative.'

This paper is written in two parts: in the first part, considering the work of Walker Percy as a background, we speculate some ways in which research can shape the participants who involve themselves in it and why these 'shapings' might occur. In the second part, we share the "site" of the research activities that center our writing of this paper. Within the first part of this paper, we utilize ideas from the work of Walker Percy – who theorized about how language works and experience might be understood in his 1975 book *The Message in the Bottle*. Our claim is that, although Percy was basically entering into a discourse about semiotics, because research is experienced his work speaks to research and how it might empower and shape the identities of those who engage in it.

The second part of this paper reports findings of our six-year longitudinal research study of 1300 school improvement projects across the province of Alberta and theorizes about what these findings mean in terms of understanding educational change, leadership, and school improvement. Our research describes the implications of teachers gaining their own understanding of complex educational issues; and, by doing so, coming to a deeper

understanding of the ethical action their knowledge or (as we will note later using Percy's work) their "news" implies. The findings suggest that both K-12 teachers and our graduate students within our Faculty of Education are motivated to ethical action (good work) through the three pillars noted previously: community, agency, and service.

Part One: The Message in the Bottle

To set out the first part of this paper, we utilize the work of Walker Percy. Percy, born in 1916, was quite anonymous until his mid-forties. He graduated from Columbia University's medical school in 1941 and went to work at Bellevue Hospital in New York City. In 1942, the 26-year-old Percy contracted tuberculosis and was restricted to a sanitarium for several years. While confined to the infirmary, as Percy noted, he was so isolated in his bed that he had little to do but read and think. And, in this isolation, he began to question things he had once believed. His writings about these considerations highlight his recognition that what he thought were his own beliefs were, actually, society's prescribed experiences. In fact, he became convinced that if humans were to have any "non-packaged" experiences these had to be gained in radical first-hand ways.

This beginning paper is indebted to Percy interesting group of essays, written over the course of several years and first published in 1975. It has an odd full title *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man is, How Queer Language is, and What One Has to Do with the Other.* Although, as noted earlier, this collection of essays addresses the topic of semiotics, we believe Percy's work can be read metaphorically (and we believe he might like it to be read as such, but then it is hard to say with a person so interested in first-hand experience) as insights about research and the triadic relationship conducting one's own research can foster. To set Percy's work chronologically, Percy writes at a point of history between what he sees as the conclusion of the modern age and the beginning of an age not yet come and, perhaps if things do not change [our interpretation], little hope for authenticity. In his essays, by working to explain how language works [and we will build off his work to show how we believe research works], he attempts to create a middle ground between two dying modernist ideologies: Judeo-Christian ethics (grounded upon individual freedom and responsibility) and science (whose rationalism and behaviorism positions humans as environmental organisms without freedom). Percy, we believe, has come to consider science a post-Darwinian simplistic activity that creates what Baudrillard calls simacrula – where every representation was itself seen as a version of something else and keeps humans from engagement in first-hand experience.

Perhaps it is a stretch, but one might tie Percy's ideas to a question of why there are so many movies in our popular culture about zombies – those creatures who seemingly move through life without actually engaging it. Always in slow motion, always moving in some semi-conscious way. The concept of qualia – how things "seem" to be – the way things "seem" to us. But what if, as Michael P. Lynch (a philosopher at the University of Connecticut) postulates, there is a "phenomenal pick-pocket" who distracts one's attention while your qualia [your sense of the way things seem to you – such as color or warmth or shape] is removed. The Matrix – the movie – basically suggests that a whole society's qualia could be false-minded. What you see is not what you get. Indeed, you

might act exactly like a person but without any sense of what it is like to be alive (Johnson, 2007).

Most interesting in Percy's work is his theorization of "The Delta Factor" that he frames in the story of Helen Keller's learning to say and sign the word *water* as Annie Sullivan (1) poured water over her hands and (2) repeatedly signed the word into her hand. As Percy theorizes, the action was more than a simple behaviorist cause and effect [or intermittent conditioning] because Keller received from both the signifier (the sign for *water*) and the referent (the water itself). What happened, Percy notes, was the creation of a triadic relationship between *water* (the word), water (the liquid), and Helen herself – as a person acting with agency to construct the bridge. These "three corners" – the Delta Δ – are, to Percy's understanding, "absolutely irreducible" and the building blocks for human intelligence.

In Percy's broad construction, Keller becomes more than organism responding to environment [past Darwin's lack of freedom]. She can now connect two unrelated things: (1) *water* the word and (2) water the liquid. Our point for this paper is that "water the liquid" becomes more than liquid because it connects both the substance (water) with the word (for water) with the identity of the human engaged in the activity (in this case Helen, herself). Thus, to state directly what we are saying in this paper, research for our teacher graduate students becomes more than data collecting and analyzing findings when it is connected to symbolic constructions that shape the lives and the identities of those persons making the constructions (doing the research). In other words, research (even scientific research) is always more than scientific, because it is conducted and constructed by people who are (by doing research) engaging in symbolic meaning-making and identity-building. They are learning things about themselves as they conduct the research. They are, in fact, becoming researchers and coming to act as researchers act.

What this means for our humble theorizing is that the methods of doing research ("water the word") and the data or findings of research ("water the liquid") connect with the teachers'/school leaders'/graduate students' identities (as they are doing the research) to create identity-shaping. Thus, graduate student research itself is much more than creating a methodological proposal for collecting data and then conducting it. It is a building block of human intelligence and human identity formation where the whole that we seem to understand in the academy is much greater than the sum of the parts. Specifically, as they came to conduct their own research at their own sites, our graduate students came to identify themselves as researchers –adding to their identities as teachers and school administrators. They have, thus, landed upon the island of the academy and are acting with agency in that space.

As an aside, although it will not be discussed in depth here, we believe we have been seeing this contestation between agents at work within the normative contests housed in traditional research ethics form to be filled out prior to conducting research with human subjects. At our University of Alberta, research ethics is clearly grounded upon a traditional scientist or medical research model where knowledgeable researchers hold a hierarchical – almost patronizing – relationship with research subjects whom they promise not to harm. In contrast, site-based action research is conducted by trusting peers

most of whom would never consider advantage over their colleagues as a status to be claimed because they all – together – have a vested interest in improving their places of engaged learning and work. What we have seen at our University is that action research will not be approved "at site" when one has any sort of implied status upon another – for example, a school administrator may not conduct research at her own school with her own teachers. In such a way, the academy controls who creates knowledge and what knowledge might be. What this belief ignores, in a deeply cynical way, is the space of a school where a community of teachers live and work together perhaps with differing tasks, but without real hierarchies in effect.

Linking this understanding to the next section, our graduate students and Alberta's teachers begin as aliens to research. Or, as Percy spins the metaphor, they are "castaways." But, what has happened is that these "castaways" or "aliens" have come to consider themselves as "at home." And, to build upon Percy's ideas, they have engaged in "good news" as they have experienced the triadic relationship of conducting research, understanding the findings of research, and seeing how that process has shaped their own understandings of who they are in the process. Percy is not alone in seeing this triad at work in how individuals shape their realities, or perhaps better said how individuals and realities help mutually shape each other. Andrew Tallon (1997), for example, defines the human spirit as a "triune consciousness" – an integration of the operations of cognition, emotion, and volition. And, as Emile Benveniste (1971) notes, there is a "consubstantiality" between thought and language.

Between News or Knowledge

To connect Percy's work with the experiences that have impacted our graduate students, we will build upon Percy's metaphor found in his essay "The Message in the Bottle." In this essay, for which the 1975 book was titled, Percy builds an extended metaphor of a castaway with amnesia. This castaway, unlike Tom Hanks, remembers nothing but the island he washes up on. As he walks the beach, the castaway finds bottles with one-sentence messages inside: "There is fresh water in the next cove," "The British are coming to Concord," or "Lead melts at 330 degrees."

A group of scientists, who also live on the island, separate these messages into two categories: empirical facts and analytic facts. But, for the castaway, this classification fails to account for the messages' impact on him – as the reader. So, the castaway creates two categories of his own: (1) knowledge and (2) news. Knowledge can be found anywhere by anyone and anytime – it is science. But news has a direct and immediate impact on one's personal life. Scientists, committed to objectivity, do not recognize differences between these categories. But, for graduate students, whose lives are at least in part always subjective, there is a huge difference in the categories.

To float back to our thesis about research and its impact upon those who engage in it, research for our graduate students can remain knowledge as it remains shaped by the dyadic relationships between signifier (learning the language of research) and referent (doing the research work itself); however, that relationship will (and has for our

teachers/graduate students) become triadic if the researcher herself or himself is shaped by the work and expands in agency and identity as a result of the work's impact as "news" on his or her personal life. In other words, our graduate students who have done site-based action research became aware and in tune with (1) the impact for positive change that research, done well, can bring to a site and (2) their own abilities to actually make positive changes at their own sites as they were motivated to do so because they were engaged in service through their research.

News, getting back to Percy, is verified differently than knowledge. Knowledge is verified empirically; news is verified empirically only after the person has already "heeded its call." One important consideration for any "castaway" [including our graduate students, many of whom had years earlier entered teaching as a way to "make a difference" in the lives of children] is the decision to attend to that piece of news or to ignore that news. For our graduate students, who had earlier "heeded the call" to the vocation of teaching, the engagement in site-based action research was a re-energizing of their commitment to teaching as a vocation in both a pragmatic and advanced manner.

In "The Message in the Bottle," Percy sets three criteria for accepting a piece of news: (a) its relevance to the hearer's predicament; (b) the trustworthiness of the news bringer; and (c) its likelihood or possibility. That possibility being, as Heidegger notes, an 'existential' one has freedom to choose. This, in some ways, matches Heidegger's (1962) view of "existentials" in Being and Time. Some 'existentials' that emerged from Heidegger's "existential analytic" were possibility, care, discourse, understanding (interpretation), etc. Because news depends heavily on the news bearer, any 'found message' is contingent for a 'castaway', who must also know something about the person who wrote the news. Hence, we treat theoretical frameworks as important to any research.

Finally, Percy notes that the problem with the society he experiences is that people attempt to cure feelings of "homelessness" (of being a castaway) by seeking knowledge from science and art (Percy suggests similarities between science and art in this sense, though one could argue Percy's epistemological implosions). The real human problem, to Percy, is that homelessness comes from being stranded on the island without an ability to receive news from others. Hence, the soul-less research of many graduate students who move through the motions without either energizing or being energized by a community or a first-hand, and deeply-engaged experience. Here we are back to zombies again. This point was the genesis of this paper – our surprise at how motivating the engagement of research was to teachers and school leaders who were, through their work, attempting to metabolize school sites and edify school culture.

Where We Are: the Academy in/and Culture

Schools and teachers neither exist outside of history or cultural. Today all of us live in a particular world, and in a particular "space" – shaped by a particular way of thinking. This is as true at the academy as it is throughout society. As a society we share certain beliefs about life and meaning. First, we believe we as a human culture have lived a history and that we can learn from the act of understanding our own history. This history

tells us that our world constantly changes and, thus, we are alert to how different things used to be. For example, research "used to be" scientific, though the way we define science and scientist has changed as well. We are no longer, as Francis Bacon was, both Christian and scientist.

What we consider reasonable and rational has also changed. For example, a hundred years ago most rational people believed women were second-class political thinkers, and our society did not allow women suffrage. Obviously, for very good reasons we now think differently. As a society, we are now more sensitive to different ways of thinking – we celebrate multi-social and multi-cultural insights. We accept and, in fact, celebrate different research methods. Our community of scholars includes materialists and chaos theorists and post-structuralists. So, we spend time spelling out our personal and theoretical frameworks so that our research and academic work can be better understood, because we believe that it matters who authors work.

What was accepted as once insightful is no longer so. Our work is ever more complex and we have lost patience with the fastidiousness of scholastic propositions that humans are rational or even that, employing Kant's method of transcendental deduction, the world and humans must be configured in a particular manner before the question "How many angels can dance on the head of a pin? can even be asked. Today's philosophers are more likely to reject the possibilities of angels out of hand (the truth claim of angels) rather than to work to determine whether a particular argument or pattern of argument is valid or invalid. Rather, we have become self-employed researchers, and over the decades our research methods are gaining complexity. Today, it would be as inappropriate and simplistic to suggest that once radical categories of research – quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods – explain our work as it would be to suggest that "twinkle, twinkle little star" expresses the cosmological thinking of Stephen Hawking. Our research thinking is shaped in our own images and has become almost as individual as we are.

We know that somewhere else someone in a different culture thinks differently than we think, and we believe they should think differently. We understand that meaning changes from culture to culture, from group to group, from time to time, and perhaps from supervisor to supervisor. As a society, our grand narratives have become individualistic; but that does not seem to have made us comfortable and we seem to be moving past postmodernism to post-postmodernism or to what Raoul Eshelman calls "performatism" – a time where subject, sign, and thing come together in ways that create an aesthetic experience of transcendence. (This experience is not so different than what we are speaking about when graduate students engage fully in research – a direct experience where meaning is created.) But, we even seem to recognize that others' experiences of transcendence differ, not only chronologically but also culturally.

Third, we are social constructivists. We understand that meanings change because in every space and time we are a people of language and that our language carries with it our culture – in fact, post-structuralists note that our culture is our meaning. We know that power exists and, as much as we eschew the thought, we know it is impossible to ignore. We also know and accept that power carries with it the privilege of shaping the

dominant discourse, and this discourse creates a world-shaping hegemony that defines how people think, act, and live. And, as academics, we know that this is as true in research as it is in 'normal life.' This understanding gives us a critical insight that suggests that our work as academic researchers is not just about bringing knowledge: it is also, as Percy suggests, about bringing news. And, here we are – engaging in research that is knowledge-producing and also identity-shaping. Our research can never be less.

Fourth, and finally, all this shapes our thinking and we don't seem to see a way out of it. Our critical discourse is largely focused at ourselves, at our histories, and at our abilities to transcend these. As a result, we seem to be always apologizing but never really meaning it. And so, we are deeply cynical. Much like Percy, we have grown up in an age where we have watched the wide-spread grand narrative – the hope for a march towards progress based on reason and on scientific technology – flame up in acts of wars and hatred that have not, indeed, led us to better lives. Nor, have they led us to realize an even simpler goal – they have not even led us toward a life of more leisure or comfort. Rather, we realize that so long ago Mary Shelley and Charles Dickens were correct - technology has become a monster chasing us in some lumbering fashion probably towards some ecological disaster or focusing our insights so narrowly that only an act of personal liberation will help us see our responsibilities for others. We are cynical because we rightfully suspect both others and ourselves; and we act out this hermeneutics of suspicion in myriad ways. We don't even seem to trust ourselves.

This landscape of academic intellect is where our schools, our teachers, and our educational leaders live and exist. Except, of course, for Joe Paterno. Mr. Paterno is one of the few living grand narratives have held his value. As Joe Paterno says: "You need to play with supreme confidence, or else you'll lose again, and then losing becomes a habit." And, to reshape this saying for our paper for our discussion of the impact of research on graduate students, "You need to research with personal confidence, or you will lose yourself and then losing yourself becomes a habit."

Part II: The Leadership Promise of Teacher Research in Alberta's Schools

This section of the paper discusses the findings from a large-scale provincial school improvement project in Alberta, Canada, and its ensuing impact over the past four years on a graduate education program at the University of Alberta. In writing this paper, we make a small number of affirmations. First, we affirm that teachers come to their research as expert researchers – with or without the personal insight that they have been, and continue to be, researchers. Our claim is that good teaching intrinsically involves good research, which entails attentive educators observing their students and, through systematic and embedded study, coming to a deeper understanding of the culture of their unique teaching and learning environments. Good teachers are always good data-collectors as they make pedagogical and curriculum choices for their students.

Second, we have come to our own key insight about research; we believe that research is a process of both knowledge-building and news-shaping. Specifically, collectively and individually engaging in research activity has inspired personal growth and the

development of individuals and communities of learners. The findings of our six-year study suggest that teachers bring their research expertise to their classroom in two ways: (1) they actively share the knowledge they have gained through their own research and from their interactions within a community of learners committed to action research practices and (2) the leadership and agency they gain from doing their work re-invigorates this work and moves them toward more active leadership by increasing their confidence and by re-shaping their identities such that they come to build an identity as a researcher and then work to carry over the research patterns and the skills of doing research into their other work so that it, too, becomes more engaged in generating data-driven insights and systematic activity.

This section of the paper shares the findings from a three-year study of a graduate education program at the University of Alberta, the Masters of Education in Educational Studies (MES) program that is built upon, among other traditional graduate work, a commitment to planning, conducting, and publishing site-based action research. The findings from this study are then juxtaposed with ongoing research drawn from a provincial community of urban and rural teachers, administrators, superintendents, universities, and governments – known collectively as the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI). In this paper, we also debunk the notion that educational research is an activity carried out only by academic experts – academic sorts who are able to control their research studies, publish results, and then make a claim of originality over the findings.

The paper articulates research at the grassroots and highlights the perspectives of Alberta teachers, administrators, and academics involved in action research projects. The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) is a province-wide program of teacher-directed research involving hundreds of schools committed to improving student learning and performance through innovative action research projects. AISI, in true Kurt Lewin fashion, supports the belief that teachers have the best insight into what needs to be improved within their own places of work, and they can be forces of change in those sites through their own research. Many of our MES graduate students first began identifying with the concept of 'teacher as researcher' through an AISI project, before moving into the MES program at the University of Alberta to further their professional growth. Some have made a reverse move.

Research Methods and Data Sources

For this part of the paper, qualitative data were collected from both the MES graduate program and from AISI action research projects, specifically in relation to teachers' self identification as "researchers." The MES program findings were drawn from two annual student surveys, an online discussion forum, and anecdotal records from faculty members teaching in the program. To gather data on the impact of action research on "teachers as researchers" within the AISI initiative, the authors conducted double-blind reviews of AISI annual reports from 25 projects relating to different educational themes (e.g., mathematics, literacy, and differentiated instruction, safe and caring schools).

As reviewers, we then facilitated a focus group with teachers and administrators from 15 school districts, charter, and private schools across the province. Finally, we conducted a series of telephone interviews, each approximately an hour in length, with additional projects that were not represented at the focus group, but were within the 25 medium and high-effect size projects. The telephone interviews and focus group helped us triangulate findings from the 25 medium and high-effect size projects.

These 25 projects were drawn from a data set of over 1000 provincial annual reports, and selected as having a medium to high-effect size on student learning. The effect size results were then averaged over all the measures for each project and weighted by the number of students involved in each measure. The average effect sizes were grouped into categories of no effect (0 or less), minimum effect (less 0.1 to 0.2), small effect (0.2 to 0.3), medium effect (0.4 to 0.7), and large effect (0.8 or higher). On the basis of the results, 25 projects were identified as medium to high in effect size and, on this basis, we selected these for in-depth qualitative analysis. In other words, the choices of which groups to interview were made by Alberta Education (a ministry of our provincial government). We simply contacted and worked with these teachers and school leaders.

The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI)

At the University of Alberta, as one of seven AISI provincial education partners, we have participated in, supported and read more than a thousand AISI annual reports (around 1300 to be more exact) over the past eight years. In performing a meta-analysis of several AISI project reports, we found signs of the important changes taking place in Alberta, Canada, through a network of action research projects imagined, implemented, and reported on by teachers (McRae and Parsons, 2006). From these reported findings, the following research themes continually emerged:

> 1. Collaborative professional development, based on community building and grassroots leadership, was deemed the best professional development. That is, collaborative professional development did a better job of developing professionals than expert-driven professional development.

> 2. Project-based (problem-based) learning, based on active engagement of students and teachers and on differentiated instruction, had the highest correlation with student learning.

> 3. Parental involvement was important to student engagement, and effective schools were communities that worked best when they had achieved high involvement and caring by everyone involved. However, parental involvement was still seen to be limited in many cases.

> 4. Integrating technology into the curriculum worked best when technology supported and advanced an inquiry stance to learning, aligned with the curriculum, promoted student creativity, collaboration and problem solving. In

successful AISI projects, the technology was not seen as the curriculum, but was an enhancement to learning of the existing curriculum.

5. Collaborative leadership, as opposed to hierarchical leadership, had a great impact on supporting student learning. AISI has shown that teachers and students can and should become leaders. Shared leadership motivated change and action research.

6. School culture was the most important change that could take place in any school. Culture related to the way things were done within a community of learners. AISI showed that school change revolved around cultural change – from teacher isolation to collaboration; hierarchy to shared leadership; and expert-based decisions to inquiry-based decisions.

The six key findings noted above are not aberrations. Those who know the body of school improvement research will see these findings fitting into this body of research findings. But our findings also suggest that teachers are sound researchers who can conduct studies and collect data that allow them to gain excellent insight into their profession. During the eight-year life of AISI, there has been an active change in the language of teachers. Specifically, the word research has been stolen from the vocabulary of experts only, slowly crept from the "goo" and evolved into the words of teachers and administrators, and then come into common usage as the projects have matured. Teachers, during their first years of work, seldom named what they were doing as research nor identified themselves as researchers. At the inception of many AISI projects, the belief system in place did not promote educators as research experts - although these teachers were seen to be undertaking action research projects on a daily basis. That has changed.

The identification of teachers as researchers is not complicated, yet it is an idea that many teachers are just beginning to embrace across Alberta. And, as teachers come to self-identify as researchers, they also have begun to engage in higher-level intellectual conversations and activities – almost as if they have graduated to a new way of thinking, talking, and acting. From our perspective working with these teachers, we believe their work has become more systematic and rigorous, their discourse has come to include "research vocabulary," and their pride of accomplishment and their confidence has increased. They now have seemed to naturally embrace school leadership, borne of the belief that they "can make a difference" where they work and with the people with whom they work.

The MES Program

At the same time as the MES program was being designed, the teacher research already completed in AISI influenced education programs at the University of Alberta. In fact, Jim was simultaneously both the Director of the University of Alberta's Faculty of Education AISI work and the designer of the Masters of Educational Studies program. Working as director of both portfolios, it was obvious that what was seen to be working

within one would be transferred to the other. Thus, the University of Alberta's Faculty of Education's new alternative-delivery graduate program, the Master of Educational Studies (MES), set out to rigorously promote teachers as educational researchers. The program sought to build upon and reshape the rigorous and well thought out research model for conducting research that would, similar to the AISI work, effect positive change at the sites where the research was being conducted. At that time, the MES program (a belief consonant with understandings that have grounded graduate research forever) was built upon the belief that conducting research would, in turn, aid the academic growth of graduate students who were also teachers.

But, the extent to which the reshaping of identities occurred was surprising. To express this growth of this identity, we have selected unsolicited insights from our graduate students that were taken (with permission) from an online discussion forum that was part of a graduate course MES students were taking. We have included only two in this paper; however, similar notes were redundant throughout the postings within the on-line forums. Here one graduate student reflects on the notion of teacher as researcher:

> *Until I entered the MES program, I underestimated the importance of research in education. That is not to say as a teacher I did not value research, but, like most teachers, I set priorities and felt that my first priority was to take care of business in the classroom. I did some professional reading, but most of it was prompted through my administrators and/or district professional development workshops. Professional development has always been important to me, but I never really saw its connection to research. I never thought about where the data came from and the efforts put forth by educational experts to complete these research projects.*

As noted, when building the Master of Education in Educational Studies (Leadership and School Improvement), many of the specifics of the MES were built simultaneously with the successes of AISI that were seen and noted. Both initiatives saw the process and content of teacher research were fundamental to investments in school leadership and school improvement. Both saw that teachers became leaders as they worked together and solved real site-based school problems. Both saw that teachers became agents of positive change as they grew in their abilities and confidence to construct research knowledge. And both saw that site-based research centered on doing good work, which in turn motivated the school community. During the second year of our MES program, we came to formally name these as three-pillars of our MES culture and we found these same three principles at work in AISI teacher research: these three pillars are (1) community, (2) agency, and (3) service.

From our synthesis of AISI teacher research findings, we concluded that teachers could and should form communities based upon creative and functional working relationships with other teachers as well as students, parents, school staff, and other schools. Our synthesis of AISI teacher research showed that teachers gained agency as they designed, conducted, and reported their AISI research. This agency included establishing a research community that was site-based; thus, these research was conducted by individuals and

communities motivated by the attitude that they "could make a difference" where they lived and worked. And they did make a difference, as they created teacher knowledge and used that knowledge to actively create change. This research–knowledge–change process energized school leaders. Finally, we concluded that good work (work in the service of students' learning) was highly motivating, helped build positive relationships, and showed teachers for what they are – people who liked kids and wanted to help.

The Educational Importance of Our Work: Is this Working?

Our master's program is based on the keystone of site-based research, which we have come to believe is the most creative motivating activity of graduate studies. Did it work? Our own research and experience suggests that it did. Here is what our graduate students (teachers) are telling us. In a posting from a monthly progress report, one teacher noted:

> *This term has been a time for constructing meaning of my role as a researcher. Amazingly, the guided approach of this program has taken me from an apprentice to a proponent of research. Experiential learning has positioned us as practitioners in our unique educational situations. Through critical reflection, questioning, actual experiences, and group interaction, we are learning how we may contribute meaningfully to serve our educational community. As researchers, we are not merely doers. We are active and engaged learners.*

We have come to see research as a key to empowering and generating educational growth and insight. We believe that research, in all its manifest forms, holds great promise for teachers as educational leaders. The findings from the AISI initiative and the Master of Education in Educational Studies (MES) program clearly illustrate that research is something teachers can and should do and something that shapes their own identities – it is, as Percy notes, good "news." It makes a difference to them, their lives, and their work. Throughout our review of eight years of AISI activity and three years of the MES graduate program, a strongly held belief has emerged from the teachers. For them, research is fundamentally a human activity embedded in the practice of educators. Both AISI and the MES program continue to engage opportunities for teacher growth in leadership, and present practical opportunities to improve schools and increase students' learning. Our assessment of the MES graduate program and AISI is that research is the single most creatively empowering activity of the experience. The activity of research has engendered tremendous growth in teacher leadership and re-invigorated the lives of the people involved in it.

Why Does Engagement in Research Matter to Teachers?

As a way to perhaps explain why engagement in research works to reshape teachers' identities and embody their senses of agency, we will go back to Walker Percy. Percy's works following his enlightenment period as he lay in the hospital included his 1954 essay "The Loss of the Creature." In this essay, he reflects directly upon his perspectives of what he calls the "packaged experiences" imposed by society.

"The Loss of the Creature" explores the way the "objective" reality of an individual is obscured and ultimately lost to systems of education and classification. For example, Percy notes that the discovery of the Grand Canyon by García López de Cárdenas is quite different than seeing the Grand Canyon today. García López de Cárdenas was awed by the Grand Canyon, but a modern-day sightseer can see it only through the lens of the symbolic complex already formed in his or her mind. Thus, the sightseer does not appreciate the Grand Canyon on its own merits, but appreciates it based on how well it conforms to a pre-existing image of the Grand Canyon, formed by the mythology surrounding it. Instead of approaching the site directly, a visitor approaches it by taking photographs, which, Percy says, is not approaching it at all. These two processes – judging the site via postcards and taking pictures of it instead of confronting it – the tourist subjugates the present to the past and to the future.

Thus, the teacher who does not himself or herself engage in the personal process of fully researching an issue of personal importance and social significance, only approaches the research in a "packaged" way – through reading the "postcards" of others (reading other research) or through taking "photographs" (considering how others' research makes sense in another context). However, engaging in site-based action research is a process that may help teachers experience the "Grand Canyon" directly. As Percy notes:

> However it may come about, we notice two traits of the second situation [here we refer to the conduct of research]: (1) an openness of the thing before one – instead of being an exercise to be learned according to an approved mode, it is a garden of delights which beckons to one; (2) a sovereignty of the knower – instead of being a consumer of a prepared experience, I am a sovereign wayfarer, a wanderer in the neighborhood of being who stumbles into the garden.

Percy suggests that "layman" in modern society surrender ownership to specialists, whom the layman believes has authority over him or her in his or her field [in this case, academic/expert researchers and the research they produce]. The result is the creation of a research "caste system" between laymen and experts. For Percy, the worst thing about this system is that the layman never realizes what has been lost by accepting these "packaged" experiences. Perhaps, for Percy, these packaged experiences are most evident in education (and we will add graduate education). Instead of engaging students in education, graduate education often transmits only itself [Freire's banking concept of education]. As a result, graduate students come not to view their education as either open or creative, nor do graduate students view themselves as sovereign. Instead they are learning their "caste." They are not agents of knowledge creation and, perhaps in an overstated way, graduate zombies moving through the graduate world yet not experiencing life in its fullness.

The overall effect of this obscuration by the structure of graduate school goes hand in hand with a basic condition of modern society. In modern society, individuals are reduced to consumers. I have had graduate students in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta note that they attend graduate classes and attempt to understand

classroom lectures or dialogue, yet find themselves ignorant of the "advanced" or esoteric vocabulary yet feeling sheepish about engaging in a kind of conversation that would enlighten them. Lectures are filled with words and concepts they hear, yet do not understand; and, when they see other graduate students partake in the discourse with such facility, they come to believe these others completely understand. So, to escape personal embarrassment they remain silent – pretending to comprehend rather than engaging in questions or conversations that might bring light to what confounds them because they believe that, should they question a conversation, such activity will unmask their ignorance and reveal them to be imposters – posing as one who understands, yet does not. Thus, a graduate student's learning becomes lost to systems of educational classification and theories created for consumers and graduate students lose a sense of ownership or even come to question if they can indeed come to own. They have not seen the "Grand Canyon" for themselves.

Thus, through language learning and the act of discourse itself in graduate school, graduate students become "social selfs" whose task is to package one's thinking in a process of self-affirmation as opposed to personal discovery. And, controlling language is important. Berger and Luckmann (1967) note that George Herbert Mead, a proponent of the social self, stressed the importance of language in the formation of the self. In an individualistic culture, which academic life at our University of Alberta and perhaps other universities seems currently to be stressing, one's task is the seeking of both self-affirmation and group-affirmation. Thus, it is easy to overlook the degree to which the self has been constructed by the influence of others.

While the individual self is not solely a self-constructed self, it is a socially constructed self. In academia, we have taken this to a new high (or low) – almost constructing a naturalistic attraction to rejection of individual agency and responsibility. It is not just the behaviorists or the Darwinians. How many philosophical constructs, we ask rhetorically, have as their ground the loss of freedom, or the sense that "self" as a construct is fiction, or that the author matters not? Feminist thinkers seem to agree. Ross (1995, p 335) notes: "The embodied self lives in a context of relationships. As with the category of embodiment, feminist theologians are critical of conceptions of the self which abstract from physical and social context."

In the face of such "packaged" graduate degrees, a group of teachers have become self-identified researchers. They have been motivated in their work by three ideas: community, agency, and service. Although the idea of service as possibly trumping self-affirmation as a goal of graduate education seems far-fetched, perhaps it is the group of people with whom we are working. Teachers, it seems, come to service as a vocational attribute. They are not alone, according to theologian Reinhold Nieburh (1944).

> Man (sic) is the kind of animal who cannot merely live. If he lives at all he
> is bound to seek the realization of his true nature; and to his true nature
> belongs his fulfillment in the lives of others. This will to live is thus trans-
> muted into the will to self-realization; and self-realization involves self-
> giving in relations to others. When this desire for self-realization is fully

explored it becomes apparent that it is subject to the paradox that the highest form of self-realization is the consequence of self-giving, but that it cannot be the intended consequence without being prematurely limited.

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