

## **The affordances of design-based research for studying multicultural literature instruction: Reflections and insights from a teacher-researcher collaboration**

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*Abstract: This paper details a teacher-researcher effort to investigate effective instructional practices for teaching multicultural literature through a collaborative, iterative process of inquiry driven by tentative, theoretical principles. The study began with a distillation of recent scholarship on multicultural literature response into a set of principles for instructional practice. The study was grounded in the paradigm of Design-Based Research; the specific methods were inspired by the Japanese professional development practice of lesson study. In this paper, each of the teachers reflects on his or her experiences of working with the shared principles, collaborating with others on lesson plans for his or her classroom, and learning from the experiences of other teachers in other school contexts. In synthesising the teachers' experiences, this paper argues that design-based research across teaching contexts holds promise as a method for studying English pedagogy and for professional development of teachers.*

*Keywords: Design-based research; high school classrooms; literature instruction; multicultural literature; teacher research.*

English educators have long agreed that multicultural literature has an important place in the English language arts classroom (International Reading Association [IRA] & National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 1996). Research into students' responses to multicultural literature has helped to pinpoint both productive and problematic aspects of students' responses to such literature (Beach, 1997; Beach, Thein & Parks, 2007; Brooks, 2006; Dressel, 2005; Moller & Allen, 2000). However, there has been little scholarship harnessing that research toward developing and investigating the efficacy of a cohesive set of principles for teaching multicultural literature in real classroom contexts. The problem of how best to teach multicultural literature – like many problems in the teaching of English – is a problem at the intersection of theory and practice.

Solving such a problem requires drawing on research to theorise what might work in classrooms, then building upon and refining those theorisations through investigations of instruction in the complex spaces of real classrooms. Solving the complex problems of English pedagogy therefore requires methodologies that pay attention to both the theoretical and the practical. Drawing on our experiences in a year-long teacher-researcher inquiry into principles for teaching multicultural literature, we reflect in this paper on the promise of Design-Based Research (DBR) (Brown, 1992;

Collins, 1992; Hoadley, 2004) as a methodology for engaging teachers and researchers in collaborative inquiry into both theory and practice in the teaching of English.

## **THE PARADIGM OF DESIGN-BASED RESEARCH**

DBR is an emerging research paradigm that is driven by a long-standing problem in educational research – that educational research on the whole has had limited real-world effects on educational practice (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). DBR addresses this issue by investigating theoretically and empirically driven instructional designs, innovations or interventions in authentic, complex instructional settings.

There are several key elements that set DBR apart from other educational research paradigms. First, unlike traditional, psychological, “laboratory” research, DBR is always situated in real educational contexts such as classrooms (Collins, 1999). Moreover, DBR takes seriously the complexity of real educational contexts. Barab and Squire (2004) explain that, “Design-based research focuses on understanding the messiness of real-world practice, with context being a core part of that story and not an extraneous variable to be trivialised” (p. 3). While many qualitative and ethnographic paradigms also value and explore contextual complexity, these paradigms are distinct from DBR because they typically focus on naturalistic observation and do not include any form of intervention.

DBR also differs from more traditional forms of research in that it focuses not on testing hypotheses, but on iterative refinement of interventions or designs over multiples cycles of enactment (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). Collins, Joseph and Bielaczyc (2004) refer to this approach as “progressive refinement”, which they explain, “involves putting a first version of a design into the world to see how it works. Then, the design is constantly revised based on experience” (p. 18).

DBR shares much in common with action research and formative evaluation designs – most importantly each of these paradigms is rooted in Dewey’s (1938) philosophy of pragmatism which suggests that theory only has value in as much as it works toward real change (Barab & Squire, 2004). However, while action research is typically carried out by a researcher who is also the teacher in the classroom under investigation, DBR involves a symbiotic relationship between a researcher or research team and a teacher or teachers. Anderson and Shattuck (2012) explain, “The partnership in a design-based study recognises that teachers are usually too busy and often ill trained to conduct rigorous research. Likewise, the researcher is often not knowledgeable of the complexities of the culture, technology, objectives and politics of an operating educational system to effectively create and measure the impact of an intervention” (p. 17). In other words, DBR involves both practitioners and scholars, building on the strengths and resources of both parties.

Finally, DBR is different from action research in that it while it strives to solve local problems of practice, it also aims beyond the local. Barab & Squire (2004) explain that, “A critical component of design-based research is that the design is conceived not just to meet local needs, but to advance a theoretical agenda, to uncover, explore, and confirm theoretical relationships” (p. 6).

DBR does not demand any one methodology; researchers who use DRB make methodological choices based on the kinds of interventions and designs under investigation and the contexts for those investigations. DBR does, however, typically involve a triangulation of data from multiple sources generated through collaborative work among researchers and practitioners (Design-Based Research Collective, 2003; Maxcy, 2003).

## **OUR USE OF DESIGN-BASED RESEARCH**

We used the major elements of Design-Based Research methodology to develop a study that would investigate the usefulness of a tentative set of principles for effective multicultural literature instruction and its practical implementation in the context of real classrooms. The principles, then, were the “design” or intervention in this study. Amanda, the university researcher in the study, culled current empirical and theoretical scholarship on students’ responses to multicultural literature, literature instruction, and multicultural pedagogy with the goal of synthesising this body of work and establishing an initial set of principles for our project. These four principles are listed below:

- Instruction on multicultural texts should encourage students to consider alternative perspectives and value stances (Louie, 2005; Thein, Beach & Parks, 2007);
- Instruction on multicultural texts should encourage students to see similarities, differences, and “differences within difference” (Grobman, 2007);
- Instruction on multicultural texts should encourage students to “talk back” to problematic constructions of difference (Enciso, 1997);
- Instruction on multicultural texts should encourage pragmatic as well as personal transformation (Henry, 2005).

In keeping with the tenets of DBR, this study aimed to understand the efficacy of these principles when carried out through instruction in a range of complex classroom contexts. Therefore, the teachers who were invited to participate in this study – Ashleigh, Christine (Chris), Amanda (Mandy), Scott, and Patricia (Tricia) – were selected in part because they taught at four very different middle and high schools in and around a large American city. These teachers came to the study with a variety of curricular and structural constraints and freedoms in their teaching sites, and they taught an array of students with various social, cultural and academic experiences and needs. As we will discuss throughout this paper, working with a shared set of principles that theorised what effective instruction on multicultural literature might accomplish, rather than a more concrete and specific intervention such as a curricular unit, made it possible to conduct this study within the authentic bounds of real classrooms.

In order to examine the efficacy of our principles in such a wide array of classrooms and curricula, we needed a manageable unit of analysis that was workable for all of the teachers in the study. Therefore we chose to conduct our inquiry on the level of the individual lesson. Given this focus, our study in many ways resembled the Japanese professional development practice of “lesson study” (*jugyoukenkyuu*) (Chokshi & Fernandez, 2004; Fernandez, 2002; Hiebert, Gallimore & Stigler, 2002). In lesson study, small groups of teachers meet regularly to a) construct specific

lessons centred on particular instructional goals, b) observe one another in their enactments of those lessons, and c) analyse and critique those enactments. Following each cycle, teachers choose to revise and re-enact the same lesson or move on to developing a new lesson that further addresses the larger instructional goal. Our DBR study resembled lesson study in its process of recursive, progressive refinement through collaborative observation and feedback on lessons. However, our study differed from lesson study in that our goal was not to refine any one lesson for use among a group of teachers, but instead to investigate and refine principles used within unique lessons each teacher constructed for his or her classroom. Additionally, our study differed from lesson study in that the goal – in keeping with DBR – aimed toward larger theoretical explorations as well as the kinds of localised instructional investigations that are the focus of lesson study.

### **Procedures**

Our research group engaged in four cycles of lesson drafting, enactment and analysis, and met a total of 10 times between September 2010 and May 2011. Each cycle began with each teacher drafting one lesson for his or her classroom that incorporated one or more of the four principles for teaching multicultural literature. Teachers were free to write their lesson plans in any form they chose. However, Amanda asked teachers to be sure to include in each lesson plan an explanation of the overarching goal of the lesson, an indication of how success in meeting that goal would be measured, a step-by-step “agenda” with reasoning behind each activity, and an estimate of time allotted to each activity. Amanda also asked the teachers to write a paragraph or two answering the following questions about each lesson:

- How are you incorporating the principles into this lesson and with what goals in mind?
- What institutional/curricular requirements impact the drafting and enactment of this lesson?
- What social and cultural attributes of your students impact the drafting and enactment of this lesson?
- What developmental attributes of your students impact the drafting and enactment of this lesson?
- How did your experience with enacting previous lessons impact the drafting of this lesson?
- How did previous feedback from our group impact the drafting of this lesson?

Answers to these questions were intended to provide contextual information necessary for the other members of the research group to understand the rationale behind each lesson. After drafting a lesson and writing a contextual paragraph or two, each teacher posted these documents on a private project website. Next, the research group read each draft and posted feedback on the website. Amanda suggested that teachers use a non-judgmental tone in their feedback, and that – while not avoiding evaluation – they focus on posing questions about how each lesson both integrated instruction aimed toward addressing the principles, and met the teacher’s goals for student learning within the constraints and freedoms of his or her curriculum.

After everyone provided feedback on the lesson drafts, we met in person as a group for a lesson-drafting meeting in which we collaboratively discussed and refined each

lesson. Following the drafting meeting, the teachers enacted their lessons while Amanda or her research assistant videotaped the lessons and posted the videotapes on the project website. All members of the research team viewed and posted feedback on each video, this time focusing on the enactment of instruction and on how students responded to the instruction in each classroom. Specifically, the team looked to see whether instruction in the lessons led students toward goals inherent in the principles (for example, students considered alternative perspectives, students noticed differences within difference, and soon), and whether achieving the goals inherent in the principles helped teachers to achieve other instructional goals outlined in their lesson plans. Finally all members of the group attended a revision meeting to discuss feedback on the videos, as well as affordances and limitations of instruction for meeting the goals inherent in the principles and on the principles themselves for helping teachers to meet their larger goals. Amanda participated in all feedback and discussions as a member of the research team, offering questions, comments and ideas based both on her experiences in classrooms and on her knowledge of empirical and theoretical scholarship on multicultural literature instruction. Following each revision meeting, Amanda wrote a research memo summarising the discussion, pinpointing instruction that seemed to meet the goals of the principles, and problematising the principles when necessary for meeting the teachers' larger instructional goals.

### **The participants and their schools**

The five teachers in the study were all former students in various courses that Amanda taught on literature instruction; each of the teachers was motivated to improve his or her teaching of multicultural texts. The teachers were Chris, a first-year teacher at Bradbury High School<sup>1</sup> (99% African American, 99% free/reduced lunch); Tricia and Mandy, both fifth-year teachers at Greenwood High School (75% African American, 25% white, 36% free/reduced lunch); Scott, a fifth-year teacher at Park Township Middle School (90% White, 7% Asian, 3% African-American, 12% free/reduced lunch); and Ashleigh, a fourth-year teacher at Elm Heights High School (95% White, 5% African-American, 20% free/reduced lunch). All five teachers were white and considered themselves to be middle-class at the time of the study. Amanda, the university researcher in this study group, was a white, middle-class, former high school English teacher with experiences teaching and conducting research in a variety of school contexts.

## **THE AFFORDANCES OF DESIGN-BASED RESEARCH FOR STUDYING MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE INSTRUCTION**

Our participation in this study taught us a great deal about the complexity of multicultural literature instruction across school and classroom contexts. Perhaps most importantly, we learned that theoretical principles are interpreted in a wide variety of ways as they are translated into instruction in the complex particularities of real classrooms. However, in this paper, we focus not on *what* we learned about multicultural literature instruction, but on *how* we learned and the affordances we see in DBR for continued investigation into multicultural literature instruction in

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<sup>1</sup> All schools are identified by pseudonym

particular, and English pedagogy more broadly. In the sections that follow, we each reflect on our experiences in this study. We have grouped these reflections according to three primary affordances that we believe to be derived by DBR.

### **Focus on principles and lessons allowed for study of a wide range of instructional choices**

In a theoretically perfect classroom, teachers would have both access to a wide range of high quality literary texts and the autonomy to teach those texts in any sequence and with any methods they found to be appropriate for their students. In real classrooms, teachers face myriad constraints and freedoms. DBR embraces these real constraints and freedoms rather than trying to control for them. Using DBR – and a set of principles implemented on the level of the lesson – provided us with a wide and flexible lens for examining what was possible in terms of translating theory about multicultural literature instruction into authentic practice. In addition, our DBR design allowed teachers to push the boundaries of their status quo instructional practices while still working within the particular demands and needs of their students, schools and curricula.

For instance, at Greenwood High School, Mandy was granted a fair amount of freedom in how she taught, but she had limited resources and texts to choose from. Therefore, for Mandy, working with design principles pushed her to be creative and thoughtful in approaching one of her primary resources – the literature anthology. Below, Mandy explains how working with our design principles was not only possible within the constraints of her limited resources, but also allowed her a new perspective on her approach to lessons that incorporated the materials available in her anthology:

Even though I ended up using the anthology, my approach to teaching the story was drastically different than the prescribed materials from the anthology. I found that basing my lesson off of the principles was one of the most beneficial things I have done for my teaching career since I started. Planning my instruction around these principles required me to deeply examine what in particular I wanted the students to “come away” with after the lesson rather than just feeling satisfied with eliciting responses to the questions suggested by the teachers’ edition of the anthology. It also required me to think and rethink about what the students’ reactions and responses might be to the characters’ backgrounds and motivations. And, it required me to be thoroughly prepared to have a discussion about those reactions. It was not difficult to design or implement lessons based on the principles; in fact, it broadened my thinking about constructing a student-centered classroom because I based my lessons around what I believed to be my students’ needs for understanding the literature and each other rather than basing my lessons on what the textbook assumed my students should take from the story.

For the research team as a whole, examining Mandy’s lesson provided us with a glimpse into what is possible with regard to teaching multicultural literature within the bounds of a literary anthology. We learned that new, contemporary texts are not always necessary for good instruction on multicultural literature. Instead, when approached through theoretically grounded principles and deliberate instructional choices rather than scripted questions, multicultural literature selections from a

classroom anthology can take on new life and can be repurposed for innovative, student-centred instruction.

Also teaching at Greenwood High School, Tricia chose to explore the usefulness of our principles through instruction on a canonical text that had been taught for years at Greenwood – *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck, 1937). Although *Of Mice and Men* would not be considered “multicultural” by most standards, Tricia provided her students with a critical, multicultural treatment of the text by teaching it alongside a series of poems about the “American dream” by authors from a range of cultural and racial backgrounds. By juxtaposing these texts, our research team noted that Tricia’s students began to construct unique interpretations of Steinbeck’s critique of the American dream and how that dream has fallen short for many groups of Americans. Further, Tricia’s interpretation of the principles in the instruction she developed for her particular classroom site illustrated for our research group the rich critical meanings that can be evoked through the laying of multicultural and canonical texts.

Similarly, because Scott was required to teach Shakespeare’s, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to his middle-school students during the course of our study, he chose to approach the text through Appleman’s (2009) “critical lenses”, which he saw as aligned with the principles, because they aided students in experimenting with alternative perspectives through the use of literary theory (Feminism, Marxism, Deconstruction, and so on). Our research team noticed that this approach to the play gave students the opportunity to “talk back” to Shakespeare’s positioning of women and treatment of social class, meeting one of the goals inherent in our principles. Like Tricia’s, Scott’s instruction led our research group to consider the usefulness of our principles across a wider range of literary texts.

Ashleigh, a teacher with substantial freedom in choosing materials and methods for her classroom, found that using our principles to plan instruction led her to actually teach fewer traditional, print literary texts, and to instead spend more time scaffolding and developing students’ critical thinking about those texts through incorporating a series of media and popular culture texts. Ashleigh explains this change in her teaching below:

During the 2009-2010 school year, students in my Academic English 10 classes read a total of 17 texts (seven short stories, seven poems, two books, and one play). During the 2010-2011 year, when much of the curricular content was shaped around the research study’s design principles, students read six fewer texts overall (five short stories, two poems, two books, and two plays). Ironically, then, during a year in which the focus was on multicultural literature pedagogy, the students actually read *less* multicultural literature. I found that the principles led me to teach texts more fully, which led to a reduced number of texts students read over the course of the school year.

However, I’m also questioning what counts as a text in the multicultural literature curriculum. If literature is only traditional print texts, then my students read less. But if the definition of literature is expanded to include print advertisements, commercials, television programs, film, songs, and other media texts, then my students had rich exposure this year indeed. I think they are certainly developing the ability to genuinely respect and value alternative perspectives, and they absolutely emerged from the course as better, more critical consumers of the media – a goal that seems to me to be aligned with the goals of the principles.

Like Ashleigh, Chris also had a great deal of freedom in how and what she taught and found that working with the principles led her to sometimes trade traditional texts for non-traditional popular culture texts that would more directly engage her students as they grappled daily with the realities of race and social class-based oppression and stereotyping. For instance, in one lesson, Chris asked students to study a music video dramatizing Eminem's (2010) song *Love the way you Lie*. In this video, Eminem – a well-known white, working-class, American musician – performs a song about a man and a woman caught in the violent cycles of a physically abusive relationship. Eminem is joined in this video by African-American musician, Rhianna, who herself was involved in a very public domestic abuse scandal. Chris asked her students to analyse both the lyrical content and the aesthetics of the video with the goal of experimenting with alternative perspectives and talking back to problematic constructions of difference.

Examining the principles at work within the freedoms of Ashleigh's and Chris's classrooms and curricula allowed our research team to see the value of extensive scaffolding of the principles prior to and in concert with the introduction of literary texts. Additionally, examining instruction in these two classrooms led our research team to consider how our principles might not only include but actually call for a more expansive view of what constitutes a literary text.

Overall we found that using a tentative set of theoretical principles as a “design” or intervention, rather than more typical interventions such as pre-determined texts, instructional units, or activities, allowed teachers in our research group to write carefully considered lessons that demonstrated for our research team how the principles both worked within the freedoms and constraints of real classrooms and might in fact push the bounds of status quo instructional practices.

### **Inquiry across schools illuminated contextual complexities of instruction based on theoretical principles**

Because working with principles rather than set curricula or content allowed for teachers from a variety of schools to take part in the study, we were able to learn a great deal by examining the juxtaposition of contexts. Teachers gained new perspectives on their own students, schools and teaching. As a research team, we began to see the contextual complexities of enacting instruction related to our theoretical principles for teaching multicultural literature.

As a teacher in an upper-middle-class, predominantly white middle school, Scott found that listening to the perspectives of the teachers who had more experience working in communities with students of colour and observing their instructional choices related to shared principles helped him to develop and refine instruction that challenged his students to consider unfamiliar discourses, dialects and cultural values. He explained:

While integrating the principles into lessons for my classes, I was asking students to consider a perspective different from their own. Specifically, we were in the middle of a unit entitled *The American Dream*. Within that unit, we were focusing on the Civil Rights Movement. In my district, we have a low population of African-Americans and students in my school are not all that aware of the topics and concepts



of the time period. Furthermore, some of the texts I chose used dialects that were unfamiliar to the majority of my students. In that spirit, I appreciated how others in the research group interpreted and commented on my approach to the principles by providing insights learned through their teaching of students from other racial and cultural backgrounds. Even more so than delivering my lessons and reflecting on them, being made privy to others' perspectives and contexts really allowed me to gain a well-rounded understanding of the principles. At the same time, I was able to have a fresh take on how to approach the principles by viewing other peoples' lessons and having the opportunity to discuss with them the choices they made – this was especially productive when we were grappling with the same principle.

Scott's experience of gaining a new perspective on his own implementation of our principles by viewing implementation of the same principle in other classrooms was echoed across all of the teachers' experiences, but perhaps most poignantly in the juxtaposition of Chris's and Ashleigh's classrooms. Initially, Ashleigh, teaching in a primarily white, middle-class school, and Chris, teaching in a nearly 100 percent poor, African-American school, found unexpected, common ground in their experiences of their students' understandings of race. Below, is an excerpt in which they puzzle together over their students' seeming lack of recognition of racism in contemporary America:

Chris:            I can say that all across the board, the majority of my kids do not feel like racism exists. Because they never leave Bradbury!... And it's such a weird little universe that's created this mindset for a lot of students, you know like "racism isn't around anymore".

Ashleigh:        Same thing with my kids, and I read somewhere, I think it was like for the class I'm taking right now in psychology of education, it said like teenagers just project this idealised view of the world. And I hadn't realised, and I was getting so frustrated with them because they were saying like, when I was asking them, "are the bad things in the world permanent?" and they're like no, like the Holocaust has ended and there are no lingering issues, and there is not racism the way it used to be.

Chris:            My kids say that and I'm like, oh my goodness! I get so frustrated with them because like in a couple of years from now they will see it, when they go outside of their community, when they go to college or to a job, they're gonna see it.

Although Chris's and Ashleigh's tenth-grade students appeared initially to have a surprisingly consistent stance on race, examining the implementation of instruction based on the principles in their two classrooms illuminated for the research team the vast differences and complexities among these groups of students, based not only on race and social class, but on their past experiences with schooling and English pedagogy.

For instance, in responding to instruction based on the first principle, which encourages students to experiment with alternative perspectives and to be tentative rather than definitive in their thinking, Chris's students said that they felt that the goal was "to be politically correct", to "talk polite" and to "compose ourselves". Conversely, Ashleigh's students said that perspective-taking was "a way of putting your opinion out there, but making it seem like it's not your opinion. It's a way to hide it," and "It's a skill to help you get what you want."

In making sense of these differences, Chris explained that her African-American students, who had been taught primarily by white teachers, were used to feeling that school – and their English classes in particular – was about teaching them academic and social conventions that would be valuable in white, middle-class worlds. It is therefore logical that Chris's students would see perspective-taking as another activity geared toward teaching them to express and defend their opinions without offending the white status quo.

By contrast, Ashleigh's students seemed to see perspective-taking as a tool of persuasion consistent with the New Critical approaches to literature instruction that Ashleigh said they had previously experienced in their college preparatory English courses in their high-achieving school. Exposure to such an approach, which asks students to develop and defend clear and definitive arguments about literature, would naturally lead students to believe that perspective-taking was aimed toward developing their argumentation skills.

Through these examples and other similar incidents that we were able to compare across classrooms, we learned that students' responses to instruction based on our principles were contextually complex, but had in common that they were aligned with students' perceptions about what would lead to academic and social success as they perceived its meaning in their particular school and English classroom contexts. More generally, incidents like these illuminated much for our research team about the integrated nature of school culture, students' racial and cultural backgrounds, and their responses to instruction, as well as the need to consider all of these factors in developing a sound and effective English pedagogy.

### **Participation in genuine inquiry increased teachers' agency, activism and intellectualism**

Perhaps the most important affordance of the DBR model of this study is one that is not directly related to any particular finding about multicultural literature instruction. Specifically, we found that DBR allowed for teachers to be active participants in genuine inquiry into their own teaching and the teaching of others. Unlike many forms of educational research in which researchers either observe (and often critique) or simply ignore teachers, DBR allows for researchers to work in concert with teachers and to value the knowledge that they can bring to the research process.

As we started this study, the teachers expressed that they typically had just two kinds of opportunities for inquiry into their own teaching – high stakes, graded projects related to university coursework and evaluations of their practice by superiors in their schools. As the study took shape, the teachers found that viewing videos of their own teaching and the teaching of others, and working through drafts of lessons in a research setting, provided an authentic, non-evaluative means of inquiry into instruction that was unique in their experiences. Below, Tricia explains her perspective on this issue:

A surprising result of the study for me, upon reflection, is that this study ended up being a celebration of teaching. Viewing the videos allowed us to notice and learn from the strengths, skill, and simple talent that great teachers have. In the course of teaching, observing one another as peers is a complete rarity – something that just doesn't happen. Anytime a teacher is observed it's by a superior who conducts an

evaluation that begins with “praise” and “strengths” that seem to serve simply as precursors to, “but here’s what you have to improve on”. Viewing the videos of myself and the other teachers allowed me to home in on the very important and always ignored – what are you doing that works well?

If this study had been run like a typical evaluative observation, I could see myself “defending” my lesson, my teaching, and what occurred in my classroom. In other words, I would want to rationalise anything that didn’t go as well as it could have. I would have spent limited time reflecting on the lesson and instruction because the observer would have gathered his data and taken it away and I would have fallen back into the grind of daily teaching. In situations like this, I would normally think, “Oh, that didn’t go well; I didn’t provide enough scaffolding, I’ll do that next time,” and file it away in my dusty mental files. The research group was a space to think about what happened, to try it again, and to see what might transpire.

In the research group you had to be willing to bare it all, and this formed a trust among the participants that, again, is rare in a “normal” teaching environment. With that trust, of course, comes more openness to constructive feedback.

As Tricia explained above, participation in the study sparked an intellectual interest for her in questions about what really works in classrooms and how schools can move more teachers toward effective practices and pedagogies. Questions like these led Tricia to an interest in curriculum development – an interest that led her to leave the classroom for a curriculum position in a larger school district that allows her to work with teachers across a variety of schools. She explained how the study helped her think critically about this work:

The study made me consider questions such as “What is curriculum?” and “What is effective teaching?” Currently, I work in a large urban district with a managed curriculum. Particular texts and content are required by a central curriculum office. Many might look at that and shudder. Many might think a managed curriculum removes a teacher’s autonomy and even negates his or her expertise in English. However, I’m thinking about ways that the district might include a set of principles as part of a managed curriculum. What if we asked teachers in an entire district to plan instruction around principles like ours? I can imagine autonomy in a managed curriculum.

Like Tricia, Chris found that participation in the study renewed her intellectual interests in teaching and invigorated her stance as a teacher activist. Since the conclusion of the study, Chris has both continued to teach at Bradbury, and also worked to establish a non-profit program that serves the needs of students in the Bradbury community. She explained:

The activist element of my “teaching persona” was greatly affected by the study. I continue to ask questions like, “How can we get it just right? How can we teach better and more deliberately? What are the big ideas and principles that are most important in multicultural literature instruction?” Being an active participant in attempting to answer these questions shaped my months after the study and led me to want to take a more active role in helping to “catch kids up” so that they have a better chance of competing fairly academically, personally, economically and ethically. With these concerns in mind, I formed the non-profit organization, FUSE Pittsburgh, (<http://fusepgh.org>) – an out-of-school program that merges the arts, music, technology, mentorship, first-rate instruction, volunteerism and community to help

decrease the literacy and achievement gaps for children ages 13 to 19. Actively being engaged by like-hearted professionals in our research study gave me the confidence and the “language” to seriously take on some of the issues that the students I teach face.

Chris also explained that active participation as a collaborator in our research study sparked an interest in further involvement in research collaborations in her activist work:

As a “researcher” I am involved in an authentic happiness study through FUSE and a local university. We want to answer the question, “How does what we do – mentoring, volunteering, instructing, modeling, giving that best part of ourselves – contribute to how truly happy we are?” Both FUSE youth participants and volunteers are taking part in the study. I am also gathering data to investigate whether students involved in FUSE are gaining literacy skills (and many other skills as well!). I’m learning that there are various “literacies” that these kids can learn besides reading, writing, and speaking, including health literacy, art literacy, technology literacy, etc. that can contribute to the learning life of students.

For both Scott and Ashleigh, learning about the process of research into classroom practice has led to considerations about returning to school to pursue advanced degrees that would allow them to become literacy researchers.

Although the teachers in this study were unique in that they were motivated, early-career teachers with personal connections to Amanda, we argue that they were also typical in the pressures they faced in their classrooms and their exposure to a spirit of anti-intellectualism that infiltrates many of America’s public schools in our current era of high-stakes testing and standardisation. Therefore we posit that their experiences of renewed and invigorated intellectualism and agency through participation in this study may have broader implications related to the power of DBR as a methodology and, perhaps, as a model for professional development.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

The complex and subjective nature of English pedagogy requires research methods that work within freedoms and constraints of real schools and classrooms to investigate our tentative theorisations about what instruction ought to accomplish. We argue that our study demonstrates that DBR is a viable model for engaging in such research. In our study, we found that incorporating and investigating principles at the manageable level of the lesson plan was not only possible within the range of classrooms and teaching styles in this study, but provided us with a wide and flexible lens for examining how theoretical principles related to teaching multicultural literature could be shaped and refined in real classroom. Further, we found DBR to be innovative in terms of encouraging teachers toward genuine intellectualism, agency, and autonomy.

As a university researcher, Amanda learned much in this study about the complexities of teaching multicultural texts. However, a key insight for Amanda was that the knowledge gained through this study was illuminated less by the study’s basis in theoretical principles themselves and more by the design’s potential to tap into the

knowledge and experiences of the teachers' vis-à-vis the principles. She explains below how this insight caused subtle shifts in her stance toward this project:

When I envisioned this study, it seemed most important to me that I begin with principles that were carefully crafted and clearly grounded in research and theory. In the first meeting of our research group, I spent a great deal of time explaining these principles, outlining the studies that support them, and making sure that the teachers understood what they might look like in practice. Although I did tell the teachers that we would “refine” the principles following each meeting, I think I expected that I would make minor refinements based on what I saw happening with my “researcher’s eye”. And, I think I assumed that the principles would remain mostly intact and would be our primary touchstone throughout the project.

On reflection, I think my approach to these principles was overly hierarchical and “top down” – I think I assumed that research and theory held more answers to what might work in practice than the teachers did. What I quickly learned, however, is that DBR insists on a true balance between theory and practice. In this study, I found that space needed to be available for the teachers to “talk back” to our tentative set of principles. I clearly remember a moment early in the study when Scott – in response to the suggestion in Principle 1 that we ask students to question their initial responses – said, “Why should we discredit initial reactions? I think that is where the real energy is. This makes me consider the point of tentative language. Is it to not offend? Or, is there another power to phrasing our language tentatively? Are we simply euphemizing and cloaking our thoughts?”

Scott’s questions opened my eyes to the power of asking teachers not just to infuse the principles into their teaching, but to be in true dialogue with them and to question them in purposeful ways. Scott’s insight led our group to deeply inquire into the promises and pitfalls of the first principle and it led me to subtly shift my focus as a researcher. Rather than foregrounding the research and theory that drove the principles, I moved toward foregrounding teachers’ knowledge and experiences as they worked in dialogue to support and question the principles. This project has taught me that as I look toward future projects in the vein of DBR, the process of developing even the initial principles ought to be collaborative and grounded in teachers’ experiences in concert with research and theory.

In addition to providing a useful model for research in the English classroom, we see DBR as a productive starting place for developing more authentic forms of professional development than those typically implemented in U.S. schools such as course work and evaluative observations. Our research project suggests that when teachers are engaged in thinking about their practice in ways that position them as intellectuals who have agency and autonomy, they are both driven to approach required curricula with reflection and creativity, and proactive in engaging students in new and innovative texts and activities. Additionally, our project demonstrates the potential usefulness of professional development that engages teachers in conversations about instruction and pedagogy across classroom and school sites. New technologies, such as digital video, shared websites and wiki spaces – some of which we used in this study – make it increasingly possible for teachers to not only engage in dialogue with other teachers, but to actually observe instruction in a wide array of classrooms.

In sum, we argue that our study demonstrates that both research and professional development that incorporate elements of DBR have the potential to provide new

insights into the teaching of English and to invigorate the practice and pedagogy of teachers.

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