Joseph M. Shosh and Charlotte Rappe Zales

Daring to Teach Writing Authentically, K–12 and Beyond

For Joseph M. Shosh and Charlotte Rappe Zales and their teacher inquiry support group, sharing their classroom experiences and discussing relevant research has led them all to take risks in their instruction, leading to meaningful and productive change in their classrooms.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation was enacted in 2001, with the intention of improving student achievement. The sanctions attached to the legislation, however, have introduced elements of fear in teachers and administrators. Many have turned to extensive low-level drill and practice sessions, leaving less time for students to read and write in authentic contexts. Monty Neill predicts, "Under NCLB, education will be seriously damaged . . . as students are coached to pass tests rather than to learn a rich curriculum that prepares them for life in the 21st century" (225).

The public's attention, too, is focused on testing; a survey of one month's articles about education in our region's leading newspaper found eighteen out of twenty-five articles reporting on outcomes of high-stakes tests. W. James Popham states, "you can be certain that the public's ideas about educational quality will be almost totally dependent on test scores now that the NCLB Act has arrived" (13).

Teachers and teacher educators conducting practitioner research on writing in the teacher inquiry support group we lead are attempting to place fears of high-stakes testing aside as they systematically examine and reflect on their teaching and their students' learning. Through their action research inquiries, these teachers are investigating innovative teaching methods that promote the higher-order thinking skills that result in genuine student achievement. The notion of promoting higher-order thinking becomes even more critical in the context of ongoing global problems. As our nation promotes democracy around the world, it is crucial to preserve our democracy at home with a highly literate populace.

To overcome their fears, what do teachers of writing dare to do in their classrooms and in their professional interactions? They make instructional decisions informed by educational research, qualitative and quantitative, to ensure student engagement and achievement. They analyze the data that matter most to them and their students, including classroom participant observation field logs, salient student work, student surveys, and transcripts of student interviews. They reflect on their data to make meaningful changes in their classroom practice. Importantly, they opt not to close the classroom door and carry on in isolation but rather choose to engage in dialogue with fellow teachers and teacher educators to lead their own professional development.

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We report here on the experiences of teachers of writing in K–12 and beyond who meet as members of our teacher inquiry support group to help one another create authentic, inquiry-based writing experiences like those described by George Hillocks Jr. (*Teaching; Testing; Ways*). As English educator Nancy Mellin McCracken reminds us, "[I]f *no* child is to be left behind, then every child must be studied. What is needed now more than ever is research on small groups and individual

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children working in particular contexts" (108; italics in original). McCracken's words echo those of Donald A. Schön a decade earlier: "The new categories of scholarly activity must take the form of action research. What else could they be? They will not consist in laboratory experimentation or statistical analysis of variance, nor will they consist only or primarily in the reflective criticism and speculation familiar to the humanities" (31). If teacher action research is to be valued as a model for self-directed professional development, it must not only be rigorous, systematic, and scholarly but also solve real-world problems for teachers as they experience them. Teachers need to support one another as they problematize their practice, articulate their inquiry questions for rigorous study, review salient research literature, and engage in multiple cycles of observation, action, and reflection (Anderson and Herr; Duckworth; Holly, Arhar, and Kasten).

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Our group includes teachers at the primary, intermediate, middle school, and high school levels, as well as a writing curriculum staff developer, all of whom are committed to reflecting on their epistemological belief systems. Each practitioner's examination of his or her classroom writing instruction led to changes in practice to promote greater student achievement and interest in writing. Teachers' inquiry into their practice within our support group sessions led directly or indirectly to the creation of a culture of inquiry in their classrooms. Interestingly, changes enacted led to what group members considered to be more democratic power structures.

Some of our group's most important new insights came from our colleagues who work with the youngest students, colleagues whom the secondary English teachers in our group rarely have the opportunity to meet within our various school-district-directed inservice programs. For example, Susan Benson, a veteran kindergarten teacher, recounted the advice her first principal gave her more than thirty years ago. "Let the children play," he said, "but take time out to teach them their letters." Today, with more pressure than ever before to develop phonemic awareness in her youngsters, Benson has dared to follow the lead of educator Vivian Gussin Paley (*Girl; You*), devoting a larger block of her precious class time to children's play. Benson explored the ways in which her kindergarten children independently incorporated writing activities into their free playtime as she facilitated a writing/play connection through the use of picture journals, a writing center, and an author's chair.

Over time, daily cultivated—rather than imposed—writing experiences worked to foster strong letter identification and knowledge of concepts about print, including left-to-right directionality, one-to-one match of printed word and spoken word, return sweep at the end of a line, punctuation and word boundaries, and hierarchies of print. She discovered that even the most initially reluctant writers chose to engage in writing related to real-life situations through play, and her work served to remind the secondary English teachers in our inquiry support group that children want our help to write their worlds.

Susan Smeltzer, a primary teacher, does not recall her secondary school writing instruction fondly. She says, "My own memories of writing in school are not pleasant. In fact, I cannot think of a single enjoyable writing memory in my school experience, but I do not want the children in my classroom to feel this way."

Her response was to schedule a writing workshop for approximately thirty to forty-five minutes each day. Here, her second-grade students could write about their experiences and interests, discuss writing with peers at all stages of the process, and participate in open-ended conferences with their classroom teacher. One student in the class, Paul, had just three words in his story notebook at the end of the first two weeks of writing workshop. Smeltzer provided scaffolding through individual teacher conferences, multiple buddy sessions, and repeated publication opportunities, and Paul became confident, prolific, and more highly skilled.

Benson's and Smeltzer's successes in their primary classrooms did not come easily for them, but they did serve to inspire the intermediate and secondary members of our inquiry support group, who faced enormous pressures to teach from part to whole. Melissa Orwan, a middle school language arts teacher, explains, "I used to think it was my job

to red-ink my students' papers to make them use those skills we have drilled into their heads through classroom exercises from outdated textbooks. Because my colleagues and I did a lot this semester with *real* writing like journals, friendly letters, emails, and creative pieces, we have observed a great deal of improvement and excitement in what our students were doing because we found ways to make what they were writing meaningful to them."

Orwan's understanding of how and why to teach grammar in the context of writing grew as a result of researching her teaching and discussing her findings with our inquiry support group, something clearly not possible in a traditional one-shot, hit-or-miss teacher inservice program. Feeling empowered by students' new writing successes in her inner-city classroom, Orwan signed on to serve as her building's language arts coordinator. In this capacity, she has encouraged her colleagues to use their grammar books as handbooks rather than as centerpieces for middle-level language arts instruction. Her principal couldn't have been more pleased with the results of this change in focus. "Our language arts teachers," he noted, "have come to understand that children can be and are great writers. If we're going to teach nothing but parts of speech in isolation, then we're going to produce nothing but frustrated writers and maybe a few grammarians."

Of course, before the teachers in our inquiry support group were ready to convince their colleagues that they had found alternatives to formulaic writing instruction that lead to genuine student achievement and interest in writing, they engaged in prolonged inquiry within their respective classrooms. For many, this is a bit disconcerting at first. Teacher-researcher Judith M. Newman explains, "[T]eachers [often] lack experiences with self-directed learning. Their academic backgrounds have consisted largely of memorizing texts and regurgitating information on assignments and exams; they have had little or no opportunity for defining and following through on self-initiated projects" (15).

As we engage in our autobiographical inquiry to examine how and why our current teaching practices have evolved as they have (Cole and Knowles), we discuss articles we've read in *Voices from the Middle, English Journal, Educational Researcher,* and other publications while helping one another to develop meaningful questions to pursue about our teaching and our students' learning. Importantly, we write *a lot* about our practice, maintaining a field log with participant observation entries, lesson plans, salient student work, questionnaires, surveys, interview transcripts, and all kinds of memos to ourselves—reflective, analytic, and methodological. Susan Bell, a middle school language arts teacher, describes the process this way:

> Write down whatever you observe, and be honest about feelings and hunches. Read and get ideas from others. Go back into the field log, read it again, and add comments about things you didn't think of before. Write them down. Go back into the log and analyze trends in order to make changes in practice. Collect more data to ascertain the various viewpoints and understandings of the students in your classroom. Write memos to help you understand their understanding. Most of all, be an ethical teacher-researcher.

Building on Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's factors that contribute to optimal experience or flow, Bell used standards-based assignments in narration, persuasion, and description to foster student reflection on what brings them enjoyment inside and outside of school. Students analyzed their experiences according to Csikszentmihalyi's eight flow criteria: locus of control, immediate feedback, skills matching challenge, deep involvement, full engagement, timelessness, loss of concern for self, and desire to repeat the activity. Empowering students as coresearchers created a forum for the sharing of ideas to make learning "more fun," in kid terms, in the classroom.

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Through Bell's work, our support group members have come to realize that studying teaching practices in a teacher action research context itself constitutes a flow experience. Each of us is in control of our respective research agenda, and our weekly meetings allow us to provide immediate, meaningful feedback to one another. While we often feel that answers to our questions lie just beyond our grasp, we eagerly accept the challenges

inherent in our inquiry and often find ourselves so deeply involved in our work that we lose track of time. Of course, we become similarly engrossed in our colleagues' work and eagerly return each week, knowing that we will continue to learn more as we discuss and reflect on each new action research cycle.

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While Bell has become our group's resident Csikszentmihalyi expert, we've attempted to examine our teacher-research data from multiple perspectives, including experiential (Dewey, *Experience*), dialogic (Freire), social constructivist (Vygotsky), and cultural (Delpit and Dowdy; hooks).

We have also opted to explore field log data more deeply by writing up pieces of our data in a variety of narrative forms, including anecdotes, vignettes, and dramas (Ely, Vinz, Anzul, and Downing). In her attempt to come to a greater understanding of her eighth-grade students' views on homework, for example, English teacher Erin Kratzer created the following vignette, using interview and observational data to give voice to the experience of one struggling student (Arthur) in her classroom:

> I don't really do homework in most of my classes, not just yours. In most of my classes it's so easy I get bored so I just chill and take the test. Anyways, I passed last marking period and I didn't hafta spend any time at home doing work. I can't hang out with my friends then. It's just a pain. Then I have to remember, and take it home, and then I have to do it. *I just don't care enough.* Why do you have to check homework, anyway? In math class he doesn't count homework, so I have a 95 and I sleep or read my book. I like it better there. He doesn't bother me. When you bother me, I feel like I have to do something, even if it isn't good. I feel like you act like my mom.

Through her construction of this vignette and her support group's discussion of Arthur and students like him, Kratzer came to new understandings about both her assignments and her students. She explains, "From Arthur, I have learned about strategies to work with other seemingly recalcitrant students. Having real choices benefited him most. It's amazing how much work I could get him to do when he thought that it was his own idea—and not mine! Originally I considered Arthur's attitude to be the main problem, but I came to realize that from his vantage point, it was my assignments and my nagging that were the problem."

Although we identify ourselves as teachers of the English language arts, we have found Peter Elbow's advice in *Writing without Teachers* to be among the most valuable we have encountered in terms of knowing how to mentor one another and, in turn, how to mentor our students in new ways. Following Elbow's advice for readers and listeners, we attempt to focus on each piece of writing, providing reactions to specific segments of the work in progress. We know that only the writer can determine which of our responses is useful to him or her. Following Elbow's advice for writers, we attempt to listen openly, noting *how* our colleagues opt to share their response and asking them for the feedback that matters most to us as writers and teachers who desire to teach writing authentically.

When sharing our work with the entire teacher inquiry support group seems too cumbersome or when we need one-on-one mentorship, we split into pairs or triads. Kratzer and her regular writing partners created criteria to support one another's teacher-research efforts. Building on Elbow's suggestions, they outlined their collaborative support process:

- Strive to support one another!
- Unlearn classroom practices that underestimate student writers.
- Provide curriculum materials and published research studies.
- Provide positive, constructive feedback.
- Offer suggestions in research methodology and teaching strategies.
- Reveal what's hidden in the data.
- Transform teaching and learning in our English classrooms.

In her efforts to facilitate meaningful dialogue among teachers of writing in her school district, writing staff developer and fellow inquiry group member Danielle Gilly identified five themes common to her teachers as they worked together to define authentic writing instruction; these themes have held true for us as a group as well. First, teach-

ers observed one another and shared their expertise to improve instructional practices. Then, they analyzed multiple sources of data to guide instruction and assessment. Next, they read and discussed research-based practices to enhance their instruction. This led to purposeful reflection and a greater understanding of why they taught writing as they did. Finally, teachers working collaboratively to conduct classroom action research fostered meaningful and lasting change.

The reflective practitioners in our teacher inquiry support group are committed to the creation of democratic classroom communities characterized by meaningful social transactions in which students and teacher write to learn as they learn to write. Similarly, we embrace a transactional approach to staff development in which teachers support collegial learning about teaching that promotes student engagement and achievement. We reject staff development models built on one-way directives and transmission of others' knowledge. As John Dewey (*Democracy*) reminds us, "In education, the currency of these externally imposed aims is responsible for the emphasis put upon the notion of preparation for a remote future and for rendering the work of both teacher and pupil mechanical and slavish" (110). We exhort our colleagues to join us in supporting democracy by daring to teach writing authentically.

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