# COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH: DISCOVERING A K-6 WRITING CURRICULUM

**PATRICIA CALLAGHAN**

When I was a grade school teacher in the mid-70's, the typical curriculum planning meeting was painfully devisive, primarily because our task was to fragment the language arts into a great number of pieces suitable for measurement in isolation. Left to our own devices, we faced endless "chicken-or-egg" arguments that usually devolved into discussions of whether to spend a day or a day and a half on diacritical marks before or after library skills. When we could secure the assistance of an expert scholar or researcher, we were usually presented with fully developed and inflexible programs based on research premises we frequently found to be contradictory to our experience or irrelevant to our particular teaching environment.

Now that I'm called on to provide such guidance, I'm determined to make the essential and ultimately satisfying process of curriculum planning less painful, and equally determined to avoid the role of the "answer-giver." Fortunately, as teachers discover the power and pleasure of classroom-based inquiry and collaborative research, I acquire a new and exciting way to be involved with inservice activities, one that recognizes the importance of discovering common assumptions about language development, of matching a language program to a specific audience and situation, of teacher observations and teacher-formulated questions as essential to educational research, and of dialectic and dialogic procedures for effective curricular decisions.

Garth Boomer defines action research as "deliberate, group or personally owned and conducted, solution-oriented investigation" (8). In short, research is inquiry. Research is learning in order to do better, "finding out in order to act more effectively" (7). Thus, our everyday teaching activities qualify. We listen, we watch, we question, we hypothesize, we reflect, we analyze, we interpret, we revise our hypotheses. Of course, his definition doesn't leave much of a role for the traditional researcher—if teachers can, and should, conduct their own inquiry according to their own needs and situations, then what should I do when schools call me for assistance? What have I to offer?

In explaining the dialectical relationship between theory and practice, Anne Berthoff provides the basis of an answer. Theory "can help us judge what's going on;" it "can explain why something works." It can give us perspective, and it can help us determine sequences (31-32). It can also, I believe, help us articulate our common assumptions about language and cognitive development, and can provide the basis for a teaching agenda that is solid enough to create a basis for deciding, on any given day, what process or strategy best suits our purposes and our students needs, while being flexible enough to allow for situational modification and change. Theory and practice, Berthoff says, "need each other" (30).

Because I am a teacher as well as a researcher, and because I choose to see all teachers as researchers, I do not assume the exclusive role of "theoretician" any more than I expect teachers to assume an oppositional role of "practitioner." However, if a "learning community" is to be established which bridges the theory/practice dichotomy, then we can acknowledge that creating a shared knowledge base might be facilitated by my bringing "theoretical coordinates" to the territory of inquiry consisting of the teachers' experiences and observations. My understanding of theory will be strengthened by their firsthand knowledge and unique insights; their understanding of the teaching experience will be strengthened by the validation and explanation that research can offer.

What should we expect from this collaboration? In summarizing the effects on teachers of action research, Dixie Goswami and Peter Stillman include the following:

1. Their teaching is transformed in important ways: they become theorists, articulating their intentions, testing their assumptions, and finding connections with practice.
2. Their perceptions of themselves as writers and teachers are transformed. . . .
3. They become rich resources who can provide the profession with information it simply doesn't have . . . (Preface).

As a researcher, I remain a learner rather than a dispenser of learning. My studies in theory gain the benefit of various experiential contexts. My own inquiry is invigorated and my professional interest sustained.

## PUTTING THE PROCESS TO WORK

When the teachers of Cottonwood Elementary School in Central Kitsap County, Washington, called for assistance, I had a chance to participate in a collaborative curriculum inquiry process. They made it clear that a traditional authoritative role was not expected or desired, and they had a clear understanding of the importance of their own professional experience.

The students at Cottonwood write constantly at every grade level. They are enthusiastically involved in the Young Authors program their teachers and principal established for them. The atmosphere of the school itself encourages self-expression and exploration. And the result? The students love to write. But while the teachers were satisfied with the fluency and excitement they were generating, they questioned whether they were addressing a full enough range of writing abilities. When it was time to "graduate" to middle school, the sixth graders took a placement test, a holistically scored response to a prompt. Cottonwood students weren't faring as well on the exam as the teachers thought was warranted by the time and energy they were investing in writing instruction. They had decided that the exam, which required an expository response, measured skills Cottonwood teachers wanted to emphasize, and they wanted help assessing their curriculum in light of those skills.

## LOCATING THE QUESTIONS

Cottonwood had, as a good deal of language arts research had encouraged, primarily emphasized narrative and expressive

writing. Their first question, then, was how early can, or *should*, the students write in modes other than expressive? Developmental curricular models had, in the past, typically been based on variant explanations of the process of "decentering," and by their logic Cottonwood's emphasis would be warranted and the placement test could be considered inappropriate. But the teachers' own observations supported the contentions of research reports by scholars like Bissex (1980) and Harste, Burke and Woodward (1981), whose sociolinguistic theories of emerging written language demonstrate how from preschool years, children manipulate symbols and signs to create meaningful messages that cover the spectrum of discourse functions.

Their second question was what needs to happen cognitively for students to shift from narrative, expressive forms to expository, relational forms of prose? Looking at examples of what they were getting from their students and at examples of what they wanted that they weren't getting, they decided that one necessary emphasis would be what Bereiter and Scardamalia describe as the shift from a "what next" pattern of organization, in which students add each piece of information as it occurs to them, to a "means-end" system, in which each piece contributes in some observable way to a unity of the whole.

And their third question was how is it that we can structure a curriculum to encourage the shift? How does what the student accomplishes at any grade level lead to and prepare for what follows? In other words, how do we select and prioritize tasks for our students? "I'm still working on fluency in sixth grade," one teacher remarked. "I can't do that and all the editing and revising skills, too, but I feel like I'm stuck with everything at the end." They wanted a better sense of the logic holding their curriculum together, a logic based on observations of actual language development.

The questions they were raising were consistent with the questions being asked by many researchers working in many classroom environments. But the available answers to the questions were not as consistent or as reliable as we all wanted. So we determined that, through dialogue, we would attempt to answer them for their particular teaching situation. Our collaborative plan had several aims. By establishing common assumptions, making observations and sharing successes, we had to discover what process skills were

involved in creating prose that exhibited the "means-end" organizational principle; we had to determine which of the skills students were capable of doing at what ages; we wanted to catalogue the ways in which teachers at each level were already approaching those skills; and we had to determine what, if any, revisions were prompted by our inquiry and conclusions.

## WHAT SKILLS SHOULD WE TEACH?

First we needed a way to think about prose as units of thought exhibiting the kind of organizational unity identified as "means-end." For the purposes of teaching elementary language arts, we decided to define it, at a minimum, as a series of sentences which accomplish some central purpose: a paragraph. While it certainly is not always a "thought unit," the paragraph can function as a rhetorical model which, as Harvey Weiner had noted, "provides solid ground for experimentation, encouraging sustained utterances within a substantive dimension of form." (61) Second, we needed to determine what skills are involved in creating a "thought unit" paragraph. As we struggle with merging the language of writing process and the language of cognition, many sub-processes have been identified, named, and renamed. I took the responsibility of categorizing, defining and listing them in the form of a heuristic which would guide our discussion. These processes included:

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| STIMULATING/INVENTING: | Open, unrestricted exploration and engagement |
| ELABORATING/DEVELOPING: | Inquiry, extension, systematic exploration with a goal or model in mind |
| CATEGORIZING/ GENERALIZING: | Relating parts, the first requirement of the "means end" organizational strategy |
| SELECTING/ORGANIZING: | Establishing a sense of purpose, the second requirement of the "means end" strategy |
| CONNECTING/LINKING: | Establishing coherence, cohesion |
| EDITING/PROOFREADING: | Employing conventional signs and symbols |

Our collaborative process may have begun with this paradigm, but the substantive discoveries came from the teachers themselves

as they used this simple list to discuss, organize, and relate their methods and strategies.

## WHEN SHOULD WE TEACH THEM?

First, the teachers discussed whether the skills in the list coincided with their own ideas of what seemed necessary to create a thought unit paragraph. The evidence they marshalled came from their own experiences as writers and their observations of their students. They began to discuss which of their students seemed lacking in which areas, and discovered quickly that the skills seem not to be clearly developmentally sequential. Kindergartners were editing their own oral narratives. Sixth graders needed possibly even more experiences with open, exploratory invention than third graders, for whom it seemed to come more naturally. They discovered, as have researchers in formal studies, wide variability of development. Individual students progress in quite different ways within particular skills areas (For research corroborating this observation, see Bereiter, 82; and National Assessment of Educational Progress, 44).

Second, in a focused discussion on which skills students could accomplish at particular grade levels, the consensus was that although some students at each grade level were capable of all the skills listed, third grade seemed to be a watershed for the "selecting/organizing" task as it related specifically to writing sentences as opposed to manipulating objects or words or relating oral narratives. Thus, their own hypothesis was that while the program should continue to emphasize narrative and expressive writing until third grade, other functions and modes might be included during that year.

## HOW DO WE TEACH THEM?

A brainstorm session resulted in a list of strategies teachers were currently using to encourage specific skills in, and out of, the context of writing assignments. I provided examples; the teachers validated, objected, modified, and added. The teachers realized that they were often doing very similar exercises, varying the level of maturity of the material but not necessarily the task. They also concluded after some discussion that such repetition was not to be avoided, but *sought*. A partial list of the activities is included here not with prescriptive intent, but to illustrate how

the generalized skills were defined more concretely through practical examples suited to a particular environment. The list also shows clearly, in part because there are no grade divisions, how many of the activities are applicable at multiple levels. It is also clear from the list that the activities not only contribute to a student's writing ability, but also constitute a list of learning activities that can be employed to make more difficult the student's learning of any other subject or skill.

Stimulating/Inventing: discussing and reacting, observing, brainstorming, listening and responding, using films or art or videos as prompts for discussions, interviewing, experimenting, reading and researching, and role playing or dramatizing.

Elaborating/Developing: Repetition of frame sentences, group dictation of details or examples of a main idea, various questioning strategies and heuristics (sense exploration, journalist's questions, classical questions, explorer's questions that examine different points of view), clustering, mapping, problem solving/observation exercises, collaborative composing, generating reasons/examples/details to support general statement provided, elaborating sentences (multiplying modifiers, filling in "generic" topic sentences), increasing descriptive detail in models.

Categorizing/Generalizing: Sorting shapes, colors, objects, words, ideas to discover similarities; listing words associated with general topics; finding "equal" and "unequal" words in lists of concrete and abstract terms; identifying subgroups in lists and naming those groups; using words in a category or subgroup, form general statements with the words, about the words; finding the general statement in a group of sentences; writing headlines for stories.

Selecting/Organizing: Cut up or scramble paragraphs for groups to reassemble, find the inappropriate sentence in a group of sentences, add the missing sentence, find the repeated or unnecessary idea (all four of the previous exercise types can be created by students, and the models can come from other texts and readers); follow specific patterns of generating paragraphs (Christensen); create patterns from reading notes or brainstormed material; use paragraph pattern practice to select and organize material (e.g. answer a question, solve a problem, describe a process, give reasons, present evidence, describe a place, show similarities or differences).

Connecting/Linking: Identify linking words and relationships between sentences, delete linking words from a paragraph and

have students add them, give a topic sentence and have students add sentences beginning with specific linking words, sentence combining, define linking words.

Editing/Proofing: Work on using specific editing symbols in groups; delete all punctuation and mechanics from a paragraph and have students replace it in groups, then compare it in groups, then compare versions discussing punctuation as meaning; for diction and usage, underline words in a paragraph to replace with words of higher or lower diction, or more appropriate or concrete choices; have them write their own handbooks, using exemplar sentences they have created.

## WHAT REVISIONS SHOULD WE MAKE?

The teachers discovered that the curricular needs were less a matter of substitution and more a matter of clarification and addition. They decided that their goal would be to address each of the six skills areas every year, reflecting a holistic, cyclic curriculum rather than a linear sequence. Teachers began identifying their own biases and emphases, looking for the skills areas they might reinforce and taking hints from other teachers as to how they might go about it. They decided to encourage composing in a variety of modes from beginning language experiences, supporting and accepting the children's early efforts to express themselves orally and in writing for a variety of purposes. They decided to extend and focus instruction in the "categorizing/generalizing" and "selecting/organizing" skills from third grade on and to help students begin to set criteria for their evaluating their writing that addresses unity as a goal. Rather than seeing writing as a separate skill, the teachers began to see it as a way of learning and found the opportunities for encouraging the kind of expository/referential writing they wanted to develop in their other subject areas.

## EFFECTS OF THE PROCESS ON THE PARTICIPANTS

The teachers were pleased with their newly discovered theoretical complementarity—they shared more common ground than they had realized. They expressed pleasure at finding that repetition in a writing curriculum was something to be encouraged rather than avoided and relief at the notion that not all students will progress in the writing curriculum in the same way: some will

make great gains in one skill; others in another—the map of progress is as individual as the students.

They also found connections with each other and began to see not only how they were, in fact, preparing students for progressive grade levels, but were also teaching them to encounter and learn information in all content areas. They had formulated specific goals, yet were free to explore the many ways to get there. And rather than attempting to apply a curricular program developed outside of their situation, they began to create, through dialogue and reliance on their own professional experience and observation, an appropriate curriculum for their own environment.

This article only describes the beginning of a process of ongoing discussion and dialogue, but a beginning which is much more productive and comfortable than my own past experiences and which reinforces ideas about communication we are all trying to teach to our students. For example, the teachers realized the efficacy of letting the form of the curriculum emerge from their own observations of skills needs, problems, and abilities. A form imposed from without, as we know from our own writing, often doesn't accommodate our unique needs. In addition, the teachers discovered a common purpose which could inform their inventing, developing, selecting, arranging, and linking of lessons in writing and across the content areas. The result? What a curriculum should be: a basis on which to make choices from the myriad of options teachers have on any given day, one that recognizes the importance of discovering common assumptions about language development, of matching a language program to a specific audience and situation, of teacher observations and teacher-formulated questions as essential to educational research, and of dialectic and dialogic procedures for effective curricular decisions.

Patsy Callaghan is an Associate Professor of English and Coordinator of English Education at Central Washington University, where she teaches rhetoric and American literature in addition to courses in writing, research and pedagogy. She has published in *Perspectives: The Journal of the Association of General and Liberal Studies, Teaching English in the Two Year College* (NCTE), and *Washington English Journal.*

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