REVIEW ESSAY


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The book is a combined endeavor through personal and electronic collaboration of four members of the Bread Loaf Teacher Network. The first chapter introduces the theoretical framework of teacher inquiry, and the following three chapters present examples of teacher inquiry carried out by the authors.

In the first chapter, Goswami and Rutherford maintain that a teacher is an agent for change in the classroom and that inquiry is essential for good teaching. Based on Emig’s framework, they discussed the value of teacher research, explained Emig’s paradigm, and stated the importance of systematic research. Borrowing from Goswami & Stillman’s (1987) and Armstrong’s (2006) work, they summarized that teachers are “better prepared to understand the very particular needs of our students, the effectiveness of our teaching, and the process of student learning” (p.4). They drew upon Emig’s (1981, 1983) Inquiry Paradigm for a systematic investigation of classroom-based teaching and learning. The paradigm consists of six components: a governing gaze, assumptions, theory/theories, intellectual tradition, methodology, and indigenous logic. They insisted that “deep understanding of the ways of teaching and learning” is significant and teacher inquiry should be “systematic, carefully conceived, and well-executed” (p. 10).

In Chapter Two, Rutherford presented her personal motivation of doing teacher research in the classroom – to improve practice and to build useable knowledge. After she realized that there was a disconnect between her life and the multicultural lives of her students, Rutherford then raised the question about how to create a positive learning environment for bilingual students to acquire advanced literacy skills and to find three relevant theories (nature of learning, language acquisition, role of curriculum) to guide research. She defined
her assumptions as successful language learning requiring complex communication in both oral and written forms, and with timely feedback. The focus of her study examined the link between discussing one’s writing and the final written product. Therefore, she audiotaped 4 students’ discussions about their writing and thinking, and all drafts of the writing process. What is worth noting is Rutherford’s concern of ethics issues, that is, to get signed permission forms from both parent and students, and to protect student identity. Rutherford advocated for a shared researcher-participant relationship between teachers and students. She built collaborative relationships with colleagues and co-researchers through research design, data collection, data analysis and application of the findings into practice. Through structuring and analyzing her research, she found that it was a rich and rewarding experience. Specifically, she learned about the curricular needs of bilingual students, the importance of colleagues, and the creation of a positive classroom environment for language and literacy acquisition.

The third chapter, written by Lewis, also adopts Emig’s (1983) inquiry paradigm to document language acquisition of young people as “full, active, creative, ethical participants in digital environment” (p.44). Although Lewis shared the same Spanish-speaking background as her Arizonian students, she was required to teach in an English-only environment. She realized that some students refused to participate in the class, but she could not use the L1 to ease students’ academic and personal distress in the classroom. She decided to become a classroom-researcher and got the help of her colleagues from two different continents. In order to address the political issue of language policies in Arizona and her students’ silence in the classroom, they formed questions focusing on bilingualism and they wrote stories about their personal language acquisition experiences. They also established an online conference to share their stories and their interpretations. Lewis chose to focus on the students who had little or limited participation in classroom discussions to act as student co-researchers. Both teachers and students posted reflections and ideas in English. Through the exchanges of teacher and student on language issues (such as code-switching) at the electronic conference, one learner in particular, Samuel, started to develop a new understanding of language. Through Samuel’s story and experience the author acknowledged the importance of narrative and stories serving as “gates into acquiring new language and voices for others to hear” (p. 63). At their final face-to-face meeting of the meaning of being bilingual, they obtained the insight that language acquisition is not only about language learning, but also about “identity, culture, acceptance, and life” (p 67). To conclude, Lewis stressed the value of engaging students as co-researchers to explore issues most relevant to students, and acknowledges the powerful impact of teacher research upon teacher and students.

Chapter 4 told about Waff’s experiences of creating affiliations and networks as well as how her membership in three different inquiry communities had helped her “develop a critical, reflective stance as a teacher engaged in school reform” (p. 69). Waff documented her inquiry from a teacher’s perspective. She participated in a teacher leadership community (Philadelphia Writing Project’s Study on Urban Learning and Leading), a teacher research community (Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching), and a multicultural education community (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity). She then told stories about how she and her co-teacher, Suzann, processed the inquiry of the teaching of a
literature course successfully with the assistance of the three inquiry community colleagues. She concluded teacher inquiry communities provide opportunities for teacher researchers to share their individual teaching experiences and to learn from each other and this eventually “generate[s] new knowledge that helps teachers make difference in improving student learning” (p. 89).

In the last chapter, Rutherford and Lewis encouraged teachers to conduct inquiry research. They provided an annotated bibliography for reference, which includes books regarding the foundations of teacher inquiry, published sample studies, theories relating to language and literacy acquisition and institutions supporting teacher research.

This book presents a grounded inquiry framework and three examples of teacher inquiry to illustrate the importance of this particular research methodology. It shows future researchers how to conduct and how to write a study report. The book illuminates the key features of inquiry research as descriptive, explorative and contextual. Undoubtedly it is a good reference for literacy and language teachers, particularly those with children from different cultural and language backgrounds.