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COMMUNICATING RESEARCH FINDINGS:
TEACHER-RESEARCHER DELIBERATIONS

Susan Florio-Ruane and JoAnn Burak Dohanich

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Abstract

This paper explores the problem of making educational research findings meaningful to teachers. Using an example from the work of the IRT Written Literacy Forum, the authors argue that the task of communicating findings should be thought of as a deliberative rather than a translational process. Using ethnographic research on writing as an example, the authors show how discussions between researchers and teachers helped to transform the researchers' statements of findings into a form usable to teachers. Questions raised in this process include the following: What are findings? Who are audiences for educational research? Which findings from research are likely to be of greatest significance to teachers? and What formats for communicating research to teachers seem to be useful and effective?

COMMUNICATING RESEARCH FINDINGS: TEACHER-RESEARCHER DELIBERATIONS¹

Susan Florio-Ruane and JoAnn Burak Dohanich²

The increase of theories and discourse, itself a cause of new strange forms of blindness, the false representation of "communication," led to horrible distortions of public consciousness. . . . We were no longer talking about anything. The language of discourse had shut out experience all together. (Bellow, 1982)

Educators, both teachers and researchers, have begun to question the usefulness of educational research. The practices of theorizing and teaching often proceed in isolation, with members of both enterprises merely lamenting the gap that seems to exist between them.

Because the reward structures of a career in research are organized around publishing, many researchers heave a great sigh of relief as they mail their technical reports off to funding agencies or receive cherished letters of acceptance from refereed journals. Often, for the career educational researcher, that work is finished, and it is time to go on to another study. The researcher need make few or no provisions for the practical applications of the findings.

Unfortunately, teachers often find themselves the recipients of these research findings. Whether they appear in the form of published reports, articles in periodicals and professional journals, or as short courses or workshops, the findings of research are often written in technical jargon and

¹The Written Literacy Project, which was the subject of the deliberations reported here, was funded by NIE Grant No. 90840. The deliberations themselves, the work of the Written Literacy Forum, were funded by the NIE as part of the IRT. This paper will appear in the November 1984 issue of Language Arts.

²Susan Florio-Ruane is co-coordinator of the IRT's Written Literacy Forum. JoAnn Burak Dohanich, an original member of the Written Literacy Forum, formerly taught at Donley Elementary School in East Lansing, Michigan.

offer esoteric, theoretical constructs that do not address teachers' needs or experiences.

As members of the Written Literacy Forum³ we, teachers and researchers, found ourselves in just such a situation at the end of a year-long descriptive study of the teaching of writing in two classrooms. A central feature of the study was that teachers were partners in various facets of the research process, including question formation, data collection, and data analysis. Yet despite the collaboration, it was left to the researchers to write about the findings. At the end of a year the researchers had produced a 200-page technical report titled, "Schooling and the Acquisition of Written Literacy," and a 5-page photocopied report called, "Findings of Practical Significance." The researchers stared at the two documents and wondered why their careful work had yielded so few findings of interest to teachers. This led them back to their teacher colleagues, with whom they framed the following questions:

1. What are findings?
2. Who are the audiences for educational research?
3. Which findings from research are likely to be of greatest significance to teachers?
4. What formats for sharing research with teachers are most useful and effective?

In asking ourselves these questions, Forum members discovered that by abdicating the responsibility of "interpretation" of the research to third parties (e.g., curriculum specialists), researchers had been missing a critical last

³The authors acknowledge all past and present members of the Written Literacy Forum for their contributions to the ideas presented here. They are, in alphabetical order, Christopher M. Clark, James Colando, Sandra Dunn, Janis Elmore, Wayne Hastings, June Martin, Rhoda Maxwell, William Metheny, Marilyn Peterson, Sylvia Stevens, and Daisy Thomas.

stage of the inquiry process. Therefore, before our project was finished both the teachers and researchers comprising our group would have to take a long, hard look at our reports of findings and work together to wrest from them meaningful information for teachers. In this process we found that teachers have a great deal to teach those who study them, and that researchers' work must be deliberated critically and transformed into new formats and language if it is to be useful to teachers in their work.

Teacher-Researcher Deliberations

In thinking about the daily round of activity, the work settings, and the ways of speaking that make up public school teaching and contrasting them with those at a university-based research institution, one finds them strikingly different. The concept of the "speech community" may be helpful here.

Gumperz (1971) defined speech communities as

human aggregates characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage. (p. 114)

In their everyday work lives, teachers and researchers occupy different speech communities. As such they have different ways of speaking about educational practice and different reasons for doing so.

Aware of the apparent gap between the findings of educational research and their usefulness to teachers, some members of the field of education speak of the need to translate research for teachers. It is often proposed that third parties (e.g., principals, curriculum specialists) interpret research findings to teachers. This solution seems to us an inappropriate oversimplification. While there is more than a grain of truth to the idea that a major problem in relating theory to practice is that researchers and teachers have different ways of speaking, translation implies that the two communities will

remain separate, that communication will flow in one direction only, and that no common language will be created. In our view, deliberations between teachers and researchers about the meaning of research for teaching can improve both the quality of educational research and its applicability in the classroom.

Eisner (1984) has located two sources of research's irrelevance to practice in the differences between the speech communities of research and teaching. First, he points out that much educational research is conceived and conducted in settings far from everyday classroom life. Many researchers, emulating behavioral and natural scientists, aim to isolate variables thought to be involved in learning in order to study them. For this reason, many educational studies fail to ring true to teachers.⁴

A second problem is also related to the languages of teachers and researchers. Eisner (1984) has argued that

as it is now conceptualized, educational research is a species of scientific inquiry, and scientific inquiry couches its conclusions and its theories in a language of propositions. (p. 451)

Theories are by their very nature incomplete. In addition, reality cannot be reduced to a set of propositions without losing its meaning. Theory can neither copy nor replace the reality found in classrooms. Thus even when researchers have completed rigorous studies and reported them responsibly to the research community, they are likely to miss entirely the community of teachers for whom their research is intended to be useful.

⁴The issue of ecological validity of psychological and educational experiments that Bronfenbrenner (1976) and others have written about is relevant here.

At the outset, our study was a case in point of this second problem. Table 1 is an example of an analytic framework that the researchers developed during the study. The matrix relates four functions of writing to the range of written forms engaged in by teacher and students in an elementary classroom. Although this matrix was a centerpiece of the researchers' theoretical work, presenting it to participating teachers did not elicit a similar "aha!" The reaction was rather, "ho hum." The teachers simply did not find that this set of relations illuminated problems of practice, the reality that they experienced every day. In addition, they did not find that it captured the study's findings very well. While the researchers aimed at generalization and explanation, the teachers were concerned with particularity and problem-solving. What was one person's finding was another's restatement of the obvious.

As teachers and researchers faced each other across the table to examine research reports and consider what in the study might be of use and interest to teachers, we began for the first time to achieve a collaboration in which each professional had the power and opportunity to say what useful knowledge had been gained in the research. We found that this process yielded new ways of speaking both to one another and to others about the fruits of our labors. Our next formulation of the findings had a distinctly different look. Rather than identifying abstractions about form and function relationships, the group identified a small number of key findings that they felt would be of interest and use to teachers. These findings concerned (1) the many, often unexploited, opportunities to teach and use writing in the course of a typical school day and (2) the potential links that can be made between children's school writing and uses of writing outside school.

Table 1

Forms and Functions of Writing in an Elementary School Classroom

FUNCTION TYPE	SAMPLE ACTIVITY	DISTINCTIVE FEATURES						
		INITIATOR	COMPOSER	WRITER/SPEAKER	AUDIENCE	FORMAT	FATE	EVALUATION
TYPE I: WRITING TO PARTICIPATE IN COMMUNITY	classroom rule-setting	teacher	teacher & students	teacher	student	by teacher and students: drafted on chalkboard; printed in colored marker on large white paper	posted; referred to when rules are broken	no
TYPE II: WRITING TO KNOW ONESELF AND OTHERS	diaries	teacher	student	student	student	by teacher: written or printed on lined paper in student-made booklets	locked in teacher's file cabinet or kept in student desk; occasionally shared with teacher, other students, or family	no
TYPE III: WRITING TO OCCUPY FREE TIME	letters and cards	student	student	student	other (parents, friends, family)	by student: printed or drawn on lined or construction paper	kept; may be given as gift to parents or friend	no
TYPE IV: WRITING TO DEMONSTRATE ACADEMIC COMPETENCE	science lab booklets	teacher	publisher	publisher & student(s)	teacher	by publisher: printed in commercial booklet	checked by teacher; filed for later use by student; pages sent home to parents by teacher	yes

Figure 1 is an example of a formulation of one key finding of the study that came out of our deliberative work. It is an explanation for teachers accompanied by a sample letter that those teachers might send to parents at the end of the school year. Here the framework is restated in a narrative form accessible to the busy teacher and in the service of a common professional concern--how to communicate with parents about the writing curriculum in a way that enables families to support writing at home. The letter to parents teaches by example various aspects of the research and does so with relatively little jargon or technical language.

Examining Table 1 and Figure 1 as two different ways of communicating about the research, several things become apparent. First, the researchers' matrix was intended for other researchers, while the teachers' letter and explanation were intended for teachers to use with parents. Second, while the researchers' formulation was abstracted from the situations studied, the teachers' formulation was situation-specific. Third, the researchers' theoretical framework was offered in a format (a table) not encountered in teachers' professional periodicals or conversation. The reformulation of research findings for teachers was in the form of brief narratives. Finally, one way of reporting the research is not simply a translation of the other. Different kinds of knowledge are emphasized by the language and format of each presentation, and this is appropriate given the different intended audiences and purposes of each.

Conclusion

A variety of solutions have been suggested to increase the relevance of educational research for the practice of teaching. Some have suggested that research be grounded in the everyday realities of teaching (Erickson, 1973).

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN WRITING AT HOME

During 1979-81 a naturalistic study of schooling and the acquisition of written literacy was conducted in two classrooms, a combined second and third and a sixth grade, by members of a research team from the Institute for Research on Teaching at Michigan State University. The first ten months of the study consisted of extensive participant observation, interviewing, teacher journal keeping, sampling of student writing, and videotaping of occasions for writing in these two classrooms. The four teachers involved in the study (two focal teachers and their teammates) were active throughout the project as research collaborators who helped to shape the inquiry and to give direction to the data interpretations.

Through the course of the study it became evident that writing and its instruction were meaningfully organized not into discrete units such as lessons, but into broader units of related activities that integrated a range of skills and served broad social and academic functions. Literacy resides not entirely in the production of documents, but also in a complex of social roles, expressive purposes, and resources for writing. These broader units were labelled occasions for writing. These occasions have four functions:

1. writing to participate in community,
2. writing to know oneself and others,
3. writing to occupy free time,
4. writing to demonstrate academic competence.

These functions allow parents to become actively involved in the process of developing their children's writing ability and competency in skill areas--the acquisition of written literacy. Writing does not exist as a self-contained subject area limited by the school curriculum and the classroom teacher. To help families become actively involved in writing the following letter, based on the four functions of writing, was developed. In its present form the letter can be sent home to families at the end of the school year as an idea list for the summer. With modification of the introductory and closing paragraphs, it becomes a useful tool at open houses, conferences times, PTA meetings. Use your imagination to adapt it to your needs.

Jo Ann Burak Dohanich
Formerly of Donley
Elementary School

Dear Family,

Parents often ask what they can do to help their children over the summer vacation. Writing is one area that you can concentrate on to help your child improve in all skill areas.

You can help your child to become a better writer by providing occasions for meaningful writing practice. Someone once said, "To learn to write, you have to write (and write and write)." This is perhaps the most important thing for your child to do to become a better writer. People write best when they have something to communicate and when they see writing as the best way to do that communicating. Here are some suggestions to start you thinking:

1. **Have your child do writing as part of regular household responsibilities:**
Make shopping lists, keep track of chore assignments, plan a party or trip (how many people will we invite, what kind of food will we need, how much will it cost?).
2. **Plan a family writing project:**
Keep a family journal or a log of a family trip (encourage both writing and drawing in these activities).
3. **Encourage your child to write to relatives and friends who may be away from home:**
Calling may be the 'next best thing to being there,' but writing will increase your child's reading and writing skills, plus it's always fun to get a reply. (It helps to choose people you know will write back).
4. **Be a good example for your child:**
Show him or her that writing is a good way to communicate. Write to your child now and then--praising him/her for a job completed, reminding him/her of a special occasion. Write letters or cards to family and/or friends, write letters to the local papers, write complaints (or compliments) about products or services in letters. Make an occasion of both writing the letter and sharing the reply with your child.
5. **Encourage diary keeping:**
To do this you'll need to respect the privacy of the diary and be open to those occasions when your child wants to share an entry with you. Why not keep a diary of your own following the same rules?
6. **Read and discuss the writing your child brings home to show you:**
Don't just look over graded papers your child brings home from school, but all types including those written for fun or projects completed at Sunday school or at Scouts.

Remember basic skills develop with writing. Writing is practiced most in situations where it is valued and useful, television and telephones notwithstanding. So write away this summer and write away it will be September.

Enjoy your summer.

Sincerely,

Figure 1. An explanation for teachers of a means of involving parents in the teaching of writing and a sample letter for teachers to send to parents.

Others have recommended that teachers collaborate in the generation of research questions and in data collection and analysis (Florio & Walsh, 1981). What we propose here is that the research process be extended to include the communication of findings and that teachers be actively involved in the interpretation of research for their own practice.

Such a solution does not preclude the fact that often teachers and researchers will look to research for different reasons. The aim of the deliberations we propose is not complete consensus. Teaching and research take place in different sociolinguistic contexts for different professional purposes. Despite these differences, we have found that it is possible for researchers and teachers to approach the study of education together and identify ways of speaking about the process of teaching that inform practice.

While the deliberations we suggest alter the usual scientific norms of theory production and reporting, they seem especially suited to bringing research on teaching into closer contact with the needs and concerns of the profession it is intended to serve. To accomplish this may require, in Eisner's words, "the construction of our own unique conceptual apparatus and research methods" (1984, p. 451).

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