



You the Researcher

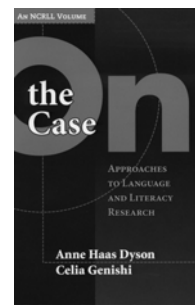
It is always risky to assume one's own experience mirrors the experience of others, but here goes one of those risks. This column offers reviews of several new and recent books that introduce or renew and extend our understanding of qualitative research methods, particularly case study research, as these methods apply to research in English language arts, literacy, and the culture of learning. Additionally, the reviews address classroom-based teacher inquiry that often takes the form of case study. The assumption I am making is that readers who are classroom teachers and librarians may be in the same position I was in, when as a veteran of 17 years in the public school classroom, I entered the doctoral program at the University of Iowa and took my first seminar focused on current research and research methods. I really didn't know much about qualitative research. I do not believe I had ever read a serious, academic research study of any kind, especially one done in my area of English language arts. I had earned my

masters degree before qualitative research was the norm. Returning to school in the early and mid-1990's, I was fascinated by the case study method and research reports using that method. For the last fifteen years, understanding and doing qualitative research has been essential for doctoral candidates in English Education. The reason I wish I had known more about qualitative research and classroom-based research by teachers while I was teaching high school English is that I think I could have and would have engaged in such projects as a classroom teacher if I had had a better understanding of how to do it.

This column will review the new book *On the Case: Approaches to Language and Literacy Research* by Anne Hass Dyson and Celia Genishi; a book in press, *What Works? A Practical Guide for Teacher Research* by Elizabeth Chiseri Strater and Bonnie Stone Sunstein; some examples of interesting and accessible case study research including *Just Girls: Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High* by Margaret J. Finders; and some book chapters that address

teacher-candidate classroom inquiry in the book *Teacher Mentor: a Dialogue for Collaborative Learning* by Peg Graham, Sally Hudson Ross, Chandra Adkins, Patti McWhorter, and Jennifer McDuffie Stewart.

On the Case: Approaches to Language and Literacy Research (2005), by Anne Hass Dyson and Celia Genishi



On the Case: Approaches to Language and Literacy Research (2005), by Anne Hass Dyson and Celia Genishi, published by Teachers College Press under the

sponsorship of the National Conference on Research in Language and Literacy (NCRL) is a small book of 131 pages before the reference sections at the end. It is the second book in a series on "Approaches to Language and Literacy Research." In a forward to this book, the NCRL series editors

frame the purpose of their series this way:

“Do you wish you could go back to graduate school and take more research courses? Are you in graduate school and worried that you don’t have the tools to become a researcher? Does your current project cry out for an approach that you aren’t quite sure how to design?” (ix)

This rhetorical appeal attracts me, most importantly because this primer offers examples of actual language and literacy studies! The foundational material I read back in the day was all borrowed from sociology and anthropology, because, though language and literacy had a few qualitative studies including Heath’s great *Ways with Words*, we had not yet reconceptualized the methodology from the view of our own classroom windows thoroughly enough to write our own foundational guides to those research methods. Here there is still plenty of Clifford Geertz; it is just not ALL Clifford Geertz. This book, while not the only such title to present the language and literacy version of qualitative research methodology, covers the ground well.

So, does your experimental eighth-grade biography unit which ditches the old research paper format and now asks students to render their research as a multigenre paper cry out to become the focus of a case study? Why not? According to *On the Case*:

“Any objective situation—a lesson, an elementary classroom [middle school and high school too], a day-care center, a community writing program or a theater project—presents a plethora of

potential ‘cases.’ Thus, we illustrate that cases are constructed, not found, as researchers make decisions about how to angle their vision on places overflowing with potential stories of human experience” (2)

But asking the question about readers researching their own classrooms and libraries is jumping ahead to the eventual destination of this column: teachers as researchers. *On the Case* takes the more foundational and formal approach to case study research in which the researcher is likely more of an outsider who must gain access to the insider experiences of the subjects she studies. Dyson and Genishi offer chapters on coming to understand the research “site,” identifying the case and designing the study, data collection, data analysis, and making generalizations. By way of illustration of each of these concepts and researcher behaviors, each chapter includes substantial excerpts from two actual case studies, one conducted by each author. For Dyson it is “Mrs. Kay’s First Grade.” For Genishi it is “Mrs. Yung’s Pre-Kindergarten.” The fact that these two very illustrative extended examples are both inquiries into the learning of very young children is my only criticism of the book. I believe some readers who read just this book might have a hard time imagining gaining the cooperation of, termed “access to,” older student research subjects. But reading any of the other books mentioned in this column will assure readers that such access can be gained.

Additionally, the authors unify their discussions by threading

another story through each of their chapters. The children’s book *Madlenka* (2000) by Peter Sis, about a young girl’s exploration of her multicultural and multigenerational city block in New York City, serves as a fictional data collection site. It is a context and “speech event” that works well as a reference background for explaining case study concepts because the story is frozen in a book; therefore, *Madlenka* is a little less wiggly than the students in actual classrooms. I found this device cool and entertaining, as well as edifying.

In the following concluding statement, the authors send readers off with a charge that should, after reading their book, make complete sense:

Living through classroom life with teachers and children in detail-rich case studies potentially stretches educators’ experience in “naturalistic” ways beyond their own educational histories. And carefully constructed “propositions,” in which the details of a case are situated within broader assertions about teaching and learning, potentially help synthesize these experiences so that common principles become salient. In these ways, we hope that the intellectual labor and joy of being on the case come to matter. (131)



Just Girls: Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High (1997) by Margaret J. Finders

Dyson and Genishi give one other piece of great advice that will

illustrate how much case studies can matter. In a five-title annotated bibliography headed “Illustrations of Case Studies” they recommend to readers *Just Girls: Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High* (1997) by Margaret J. Finders published by Teachers College Press. Now this is a killer book. I have seen first hand how Finders’ case studies can rouse teachers to think “beyond their own educational histories.”

The scene is an Iowa Council of Teachers of English fall conference. Peg Finders, who began her career as an educator teaching seventh-grade English in southeast Iowa and had since become an assistant professor of English Education at Purdue, was our keynote speaker. We were proud to welcome her back and likely more interested in asking about her daughters than the actual content of her comments or her book. Were we in for a shock!

At that time Iowa was still staunchly “writing project country.” We would get 600 or 700 teachers at our fall conferences in the early ’90s, mostly writing project participants. Ours was a unified, state-wide writing project built on a lore that George Hillocks in *Research on Written Composition* (1986) calls a “naturalistic approach” to writing process pedagogy—invite students to write meaningful whole texts, offer them peer and instructor support through the writing process, and celebrate the successes of those pieces and the growth and development of those student authors with various kinds of classroom publishing. I believed, as did a lot of other people at that conference, that we could make the

invitation to write so attractive and the support for engaging in the writing process so non-threatening that nearly every student could and would accept the invitation. But that afternoon, Margaret Finders, an Iowa Writing Projecter from way back, told us that social and cultural factors in the school and in the lives of middle school girls lead many students to only pretend to participate in our sacred writing workshops. A group of working-class girls she came to know as the “tough cookies” could not be lured into trusting other students or the teacher enough to share their writing freely. Their home culture valued “doing things yourself.” Peer response to drafts-in-progress and other collaborative learning strategies were seen by the Cookies as “cheating.” When it came time for peer-written response celebrating the strengths of finished pieces, one Cookie brought to class a multicolored pen so she could write all of the comments on her own paper to make it look like others had read and commented on it. She did not trust her peers, even within the classroom community the teacher worked so hard to build. Wow! I remember being hardly able to wait until the end of Finders’ talk to jump up and start arguing about this.

And it was not just the Tough Cookies who found themselves constrained from participating in the “perfect Heinemann classrooms” we thought we were creating. The privileged girls, the “social queens,” were shown to be much more concerned about the number of notes they were passed between classes than the papers they wrote about their grandmoth-

ers in our classes! Finders showed us the Social Queens were under pressure to “dumb down” in order to be popular. Social Queens would check out two kinds of books from the library: the popular novels they carried in the halls, which advertised their membership in the group, and the real books they actually read, which they hid in their backpacks.

In concluding one of the themes in her 145-page book, Finders states:

Despite teachers’ perceptions of the success of small-group work and reading/writing workshops, the girls, constrained by their social roles, coopted literate practices when forced to work with those outside their circle of significance; yet, they maintained the appearance of performing in socially sanctioned ways. . . .

From the perspectives of the focal students, literate practices could be unsafe. Carrying the wrong kind of book, writing the wrong kind of story, passing notes to the wrong people, all might mark one as an outsider or as an insider in the wrong group. . . .

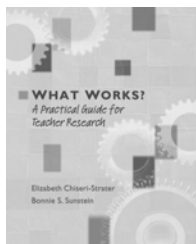
Indeed, there were multiple expectations circulating about the junior high classroom. . . . The institutional expectations, while clearly understood by the focal students, were often coopted by the girls in order to meet the expectations of other social networks. A keen awareness of the power of peer dynamics in the classroom prevented any student from believing in a classroom as a safe haven. (119)

I am not sure anyone who stayed in that hotel that night got to sleep before midnight. In the bar and in various hospitality suites throughout the hotel, teachers were talking about what Finders said. I imagine some poor salesman in the room next to one of those forums having to turn up his TV to drown

out the “English teachers” shouting next door.

There are a lot of other great things in the book besides parts I have touched on. Telling you that Finders named one of her case study groups the Tough Cookies is just the tiny tip of the iceberg of what her case study reveals about the lives and literacies of the Cookies. *Just Girls* does illustrate perfectly the case study concepts presented in *On The Case*. This is a book worth the time of every secondary English educator, librarian, and parent of adolescent girls. Reading *Just Girls* would benefit principals or counselors too.

But *Just Girls* presents a study that could not have been done by a full-time classroom teacher. The time demands would be too great and the case Finders constructed and the angle of her vision demanded the stance of an outsider looking in—someone who was not “the teacher.” The following two books show how we classroom teachers can study our own students with the aim of not only answering the fundamental qualitative question “what’s going on here” but with the further aim of improving our own teaching practices through the information we gather.



What Works? A Practical Guide for Teacher Research by Elizabeth Chiseri Strater and Bonnie Stone Sunstein

What Works? A Practical Guide for Teacher Research by Elizabeth Chiseri Strater and Bonnie Stone

Sunstein (in press from Boynton/Cook at the time of this writing) is the book I needed when I was a high school teacher.

Then I had questions like: Why is it so much fun to teach my Individualized Reading class? And what is going on with those senior boys who get so hooked on Steinbeck that I have to troll used bookstores to replenish my stock of *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row*? Certainly, to many senior boys, the prospect of spending a few more years hanging out with guys like Pablo and Big Joe Portagee is understandably attractive. But having one after the other rural Midwestern adolescent male select and read *Grapes of Wrath* and especially *East of Eden*?

I wish I had taken the time to systematically discover and articulate what was going on there. If I had had *What Works?* I could have done it.

Sunstein and Strater (who partnered in another book on qualitative methods, *Fieldworking*, Bedford/St.Martin’s, 1997, 2002, third edition, late 2006) lead readers through the dual process of becoming a teacher researcher and doing teacher research (to my mind symbiotic but separate processes) with ten chapters featuring such titles as “PrepWork,” “Headwork,” “Legwork,” and “Eyework.” Each chapter contains three sections: “Strategies, Mindwork, and Snapshot.” While the Strategies section discusses some essential feature of qualitative methodology, Mindwork prompts personal/professional reflective writing exercises to get the would-be teacher researcher thinking in the right direction and about the right things. The Snap-

shot section of each chapter presents a different, accessible, and entirely “real” teacher researcher and the research study she conducted. I put real in quotes, not only because the teachers and the studies *are* real, but because I can see some aspect of my public school teacher-self in each of these teachers.

“Chapter 2: Scratchwork: Shaping a Question” won me over. The authors begin:

As teachers we’re not afraid of questions. We are active inquirers, constantly challenging our curriculum, our school culture, our colleagues, and our students. Questions frame our lessons, evaluate our students’ learning, and assess the worth of our own teaching. It won’t be unfamiliar to you to pose a research question for your study. Research questions often begin as small, nagging ideas, like an intuition that needs following, or a hunch that begs further attention. In a sense, shaping a research question is like scratching an itch that bothers you. (I cannot give you a page reference because I am reading only a manuscript copy.)

Steinbeck . . . Was it the themes, the settings. . . ah, maybe the male-dominated cast of characters? Those questions still bother me.

And Sunstein and Strater are correct when they assert in Chapter 2 that it would take teacher research in *my* classroom to answer *my* questions:

The teaching and learning that happens in our classrooms is often more qualitative than quantitative. We interact inside cultural settings, more like parenting, coaching, or mentoring. . . . When we study people inside their own cultures, we don’t try to generalize from a large population. We don’t look for what’s replicable, reliable, or statistically valid. Rather, we look for

what's singular, particular, and unique about the students in our classes and their work, about ourselves and our teaching. As researchers, we want to include as much of our situation as we can, rather than strip the context or "control" it somehow. In social science, qualitative research, and particularly in teacher inquiry, our goal is to capture particularity, to create a richly detailed, sharply focused snapshot.

Maybe these male Steinbeck readers were given some kind license to read seriously by the context of a big guy with a beard who liked to talk about deer hunting handing out the books and saying that East of Eden was the best book he had ever read! Be kind of too bad if it was that simple.

Really, you start reading *What Works?*, and you cannot stop thinking like this.

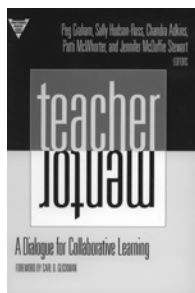
The strategy focused on in Chapter 2 is "Gaining the Insider/ Outsiders Perspective [through] Generating Trial Questions, Narrowing the Questions, Creating Subquestions within the Questions." Using these questioning strategies, teacher researcher Gail Russell, an inner-city high school teacher bothered by the lack of engagement of her students in their own writing, arrives at this research question: "In what ways does reflective writing encourage students to appropriate their writing?" Russell's study shows us how she refined her questions ("Do the ways that students talk and write about writing ('reflect') suggest that they know their own texts?"); and how she goes on to collect and analyze her data. To learn her conclusions, you will have to read the book.

There is no pie in the sky here. These authors know the difficulties

of public school teaching so well and confront them so honestly that one of their main discussions is how to fit teacher research around full-time teaching schedules.

Sunstein and Strater also promote realistic and extended calendars for such research. Teacher researchers supported here are not meeting thesis or dissertation deadlines. But I should caution readers: the stories of individual teacher researchers in this book are infectious. When you read this book you will want to do teacher research. And you will also know how to do it, so there will be no excuse not to.

Any reader of this column who has experienced the adolescent male/Steinbeck phenomena please contact me at bill.broz@uni.edu.



Teacher Mentor: a Dialogue for Collaborative Learning (1999) published by NCTE and Teachers College Press by Peg Graham, Sally Hudson Ross,

Chandra Adkins, Patti McWhorter, and Jennifer McDuffie Stewart

Finally, I want to mention a book that, while not primarily about case study research, presents some classroom case studies done by student teachers or done in collaboration between student teachers and their host teachers. I suggest that these case studies show not only how you might be able to work with a student teacher to do a small case study, especially if you have your student teacher for a whole semester (or in the case of the examples in the book, a

whole school year), but how classroom teachers might enlist the cooperation of aides, counselors, or a volunteer to assist in conducting teacher research.

Teacher Mentor: a Dialogue for Collaborative Learning (1999) published by NCTE and Teachers College Press by Peg Graham, Sally Hudson Ross, Chandra Adkins, Patti McWhorter, and Jennifer McDuffie Stewart is primarily the story of a noble experiment to create true collaboration between a university teacher education program and the classroom teachers who serve as hosts and mentors for the student teachers from that program at the University of Georgia in Athens. The way Graham and others collaborate with host teachers to reform their program is in itself worth reading for anyone who has prepared teacher candidates, hosted student teachers, or supervised student teachers for a teacher preparation program. I have been in all three roles and am envious of the partnership presented in this book.

One of the features of the context at UGA is that teacher candidates spend a whole year engaged in field observation and student teaching in the same school and classroom. During the fall semester of the year, those students divide their time between classroom observation and on-campus methods courses. In an attempt to instill in these future teachers the value of reflection on practice, part of the students' on-campus course work offers them training as qualitative researchers preparing to do "teacher research" in the classrooms where they will be student teaching. Part two of the

book, "Teacher Candidate Research on Literacy in High School Classrooms," presents four case studies done by student teachers. In some instances the special roles of student teacher and host teacher allow both parties to participate in data collection, the student teacher collecting data as she prepares to take over the class for her teaching units and the host teacher assuming the role of data collector while the student teacher is teaching.

In Chapter 6 Graham and Hudson-Ross give a detailed look at how they prepare their teacher candidates as teacher researchers. The experiences through which they guide their students could be copied by teachers to prepare themselves to become teacher researchers. Of particular importance is the repeated illustration of how and why the researchers must locate themselves and their own histories and biases within the focus of study. Graham and Hudson-Ross guide their students to profile themselves as learners, and to write and discuss their own writing and reading autobiographies before they attempt to study their future students' reading and writing lives. In the case studies that make up the rest of Part Two, one group of several student teachers reports "on the practices that encourage and discourage young writers." (80) Another student teacher studies "Small Group Book Sharing in Secondary Schools;" and a third studies "Using a Behavior Journal to Discover What Causes Disruptions." The final case study in the book shows the collaboration between the

student teacher and mentor teacher as they study student engagement in the curriculum of a new vocational English course in applied communications.

In introducing the section containing these case studies, the authors state:

In all of this research there is evidence of the collaborative nature of our community and the value we place on teacher research. The research questions often are negotiated by teacher candidates, mentor teachers, and the university faculty. We share results and insights; we reconceptualize our roles as educators; we act on our findings. Above all, we choose to continue the research each year as our group expands to admit new faces and new questions. (63)

I say, if a student teacher can do teacher research, we should be able to do it too. These new teachers entering the field already trained as teacher researchers deserve to be celebrated. The professional educators in both the schools and the university who collaborated to mentor these new teachers into the profession deserve to be congratulated.

*** **

As practitioner/scholars, our lives as classroom teachers are filled with questions. Sometimes we find suggestions for answers to those questions in the professional literature and in the person-to-person professional discourse of our discipline. Sometimes that literature and those discussions do not provide specific enough or satisfying enough answers. Or maybe we just want to become more active participants in the professional

discourse by answering our own questions and sharing those answers with others. As Sunstein and Strater assert above:

As teachers we're not afraid of questions. We are active inquirers, constantly challenging our curriculum, our school culture, our colleagues, and our students. Questions frame our lessons, evaluate our students' learning, and assess the worth of our own teaching. It won't be unfamiliar to you to pose a research question for your study.

A Very Partial List of Books About Teacher Inquiry Suggested by Sunstein and Strater

- Bissex, Glenda and Richard Bullock. 1987. *Seeing for Ourselves: Case-Study Research by Teachers of Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Burnafor, Gail, Joseph Fischer, and David Hobson. 2001. *Teachers Doing Research: The Power of Action Through Inquiry*. Second Edition. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Goswami, Dixie and Peter Stillman. 1987. *Reclaiming the Classroom: Teacher Research as an Agency for Change*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

Bill Broz is Assistant Professor of English in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Northern Iowa. His recent publications include Teaching Writing Teachers of High School and First-Year Composition, edited with Robert Tremmel, Heinemann, 2002, and articles on grammar and censorship in Voices from the Middle and the Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy. He was the 2002 recipient of the NCTE's Edwin M. Hopkins Award for his 2001 English Journal article, "Hope and Irony: Annie on My Mind." He can be reached most at bill.broz@uni.edu or 102 Baker Hall, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA 50614-0502.