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Suzanne SooHoo

Chapman University, soohoo@chapman.edu

Chris Strople

Santa Ana Unified School District

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Opus: Research & Creativity at IPFW

Politics, Pragmatics, and Passion: Three Markers on the Teacher Research Journey

By Suzanne SooHoo, *Chapman University*,
& Chris Strople, *Santa Ana Unified School District*

Abstract

This article captures the rich collaboration between a fifth-grade teacher and a university professor in their search for the value and significance of teacher inquiry in public school classrooms. Within this action research, both individuals modified their respective classroom practices so as to accommodate each other in the pursuit of a legitimate and justifiable research question. The end result is that both parties are able to more fully engage in theorizing about the politics, pragmatics, and passion both needed and desired in order to ask relevant research questions.

Introduction

Action research can take many forms. Sometimes it is an emergent process involving a collaborative investigation of people, a community, and/or a phenomenon. Sometimes it is an inquiry of one's own classroom practice. In the context of this article, action research was purposeful, engaged dialogue over a six-month period, within and beyond shared classrooms in the K–12 and university sectors of education. Chris was a fifth-grade teacher in the Santa Ana Unified School District. He was also a student in the Master of Arts in Teaching program and a student in Suzanne's Teacher as Scholarly Practitioner class. In this article, Chris describes the manner in which a graduate-student-turned-teacher-researcher approaches teacher research and how he thinks about the whirlpool of politics, pragmatics, and passion demanding his attention simultaneously and separately.

As the university instructor, Suzanne was interested in building a theory about how teacher-researchers approach the identification of the research question. She turns to her students for answers. Chris is a willing participant, eager to uncover his own epistemology.

Politics, Pragmatics, and Passion

What follows is Chris and Suzanne's collective experience from their individual perspectives. Chris starts this article by relating his impressions and contemplating his participation in teacher research. Suzanne describes what she learns from new teacher-researchers as they approach the identification of their research questions. The shared need to understand the significance and the context of the teacher-research journey formed a unique collaboration between the teacher-researcher and university professor. Both individuals were curious about how one comes to accept and engage in teacher research in public schools and in university classrooms. Individually, the mutual curiosity and emerging theory played out differently as they wrestled with these ideas in relationship to modifying their own classroom practices. Nonetheless, they made a commitment to each other to be key informants and critical friends of each other's line of inquiry. In the end, they found the research direction is heavily influenced by the varying degrees of three markers on the teacher research journey: politics, pragmatics, and passion.

Approaching Teacher Research — *Chris Stropole*

My school is located in Santa Ana, California. Its 1,200 students attend school on a multi-track system during the calendar year in order to reduce overcrowding at a school that was constructed to serve a student population of approximately 600–700 students.

An Update on Urban Hardship, research published by the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, determined that Santa Ana had the greatest amount of urban hardship in the United States. This determination was based on six key factors: unemployment, dependency, education, income level, crowded housing, and poverty. Eighty-six cities were reviewed in 1990 and 2000. Santa Ana ranked third in 1990 and first in 2000 as the city with the greatest hardship of the 86 cities studied, which included cities like Detroit, New Orleans, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and New York City.

The challenges that face our students are the most severe you can imagine. Families share a garage with two other families as their living space, with no cooking or bathroom facilities. They have no healthcare or access to medical services. Adults work two jobs for less than minimum wage. According to the California Department of Education's Demographics Office, 89.5 percent of the students who attended Heninger in 2004–2005 qualified for free or reduced meals, 68 percent are English learners (their primary language is Spanish), 97.9 percent are considered "Hispanic or Latino."

The school borders two main arteries through the city. Many of the portable classrooms are within 10 feet of one of the two major streets. The heavy traffic is constant throughout the school day. Lessons are interrupted regularly by emergency vehicle sirens or by vehicles with booming sound systems that rattle the classroom windows.

To speak of any school is also to speak of the community that it serves and the city in which the community lies. Santa Ana is unique in many ways. Located in Orange County (the “OC”), Santa Ana is the seat of county government, with most of the county government services and its respective offices and buildings within walking distance from one another. The Ronald Reagan Federal Courthouse (visible and two blocks walking distance from our site) and the state 4th District Court of Appeals are also located here.

In contrast, it is common to see homeless people downtown. Our site’s proximity to downtown enables us to see on a frequent basis homeless people on the corner or outside our school. At the time of my writing this article, there were four homeless families with children at the school; one family uses our restroom facilities on a daily basis as an all-purpose bathroom for bathing and general hygiene. As a school, we make every attempt to make these facilities available and impart a sense of hope, so the families are able to maintain a sense of dignity.

Politics

Politics is often a necessary evil in our profession. I found that in my first years of teaching, I was inundated by politics found in “teacher talk” in the lounge; evaluations by administrators; district decisions regarding textbooks, curriculum, and state standards; etc. I learned after awhile I could disengage myself successfully from the impact of much of that political activity by selectively ignoring all but the most pressing issues. Teacher research, although political on its own merit, was a refuge from this form of politics.

Teacher research challenges the traditional models of research. It is not as linear or neat as traditional research. It is organic and one research activity (e.g., data collection) blurs into another (e.g., intervention). One does not move clearly from one method to the next. Part of the difficulty is that teacher research is a circular or spiraling process. The linear model of traditional research that is predominantly valued in the educational community limits the voices of teachers by devaluing the validity of their findings.

Engaging in this form of research is a challenge on many levels. For teachers, there are many reasons not to conduct teacher research. Initially they do not see themselves as scholarly practitioners. The larger education community has not had faith that teachers could discover better ways to meet the needs of their students. Some teachers have internalized this ascribed inadequacy and believe the popular colloquialism, “Those who can’t, teach.” I do not mean to infer there is some far-reaching conspiracy theory that usurps the confidence and significance of teachers conducting their own research, but teachers themselves have referred to themselves as “Jack of all trades, master of none.” Moreover, for the bureaucracy of education to function, teachers must be disempowered, not empowered by teacher research. Teachers, in turn, transmit this ethic to students

Politics, Pragmatics, and Passion

by limiting student voice. When a teacher like me chooses to focus on teacher-student interactions, this act challenges tradition and offers a viable alternative.

Developing student voice in the classroom led me to think about questions like “What would the impact be if learners were actually heard by adults?” “Is it politically impractical to conduct this research?” “How many reasons were there to not conduct teacher research?” After conducting my research, I am uncertain if it is possible to separate politics from education.

Pragmatics

It may be a little easier to understand my experience with teacher research if I provide background information regarding what led me to such an experience in the first place. As I entered my fifth year of teaching, I decided to return to the university to obtain my master’s degree in teaching. I was motivated by pragmatics in much the same way as anyone is, specifically, for a bump on the pay scale. That is not to say I was nonchalant about my role as a teacher and as a professional, but my motivation and expectations in no way foreshadowed the experience I would have with teacher research.

When I started the master’s program, my enthusiasm was relegated to getting through the year as painlessly as possible. I was teaching full time, after all, which is usually about as much stress as most teachers need for the day, myself included. I figured I would have a mostly uneventful time while I was there, maybe acquire some useful information that I could apply in my classroom and do what was required to get the degree. I was the perfect pragmatist.

Passion

What would begin as a relatively innocuous final project for my master’s degree would develop into a more important pursuit for understanding and would end in a realization that my experiences as a teacher-researcher were professionally and personally significant. It began with my second looping experience. For those unfamiliar with looping, it is a process in which a teacher advances with the same class to the next grade level. In my case, I looped from fourth to fifth grade. This was not the first time I looped with a class, however it was more significant.

During my second looping experience, my students and I shared stories, stories of our experiences, stories of students’ developing intellectual abilities, and stories of my developing philosophy of education. Two years with the same class allowed us to have shared moments of possibility and hope. Simultaneously, I became deeply curious about my current class. The class as a whole was showing signs of significant academic improvement as well. Evidence of the improvement lay in their standardized test scores and in their demeanor, maturity, and individuality. I remember wondering where all

of that began, because after spending two years together, the days can and do blend together. I wanted to know what the students found meaningful and significant as well as what they thought about their experience in our classroom. I also wanted to know if there was a correlation between their experiences and mine. I wondered about the significance of the humanistic philosophy that I was using in the classroom.

That is where teacher research came in. I found my enthusiasm for teacher research grew quicker than I anticipated; I found much of what I was learning was extremely relevant to my everyday practice. What I was most interested in pertained to educational philosophy and learning theory. Internally, I began to make connections between what I was learning and what was occurring in my classroom every day. I also found that much of the practice I incorporated in my classroom could be tied to educational philosophy and learning theory.

I consider myself good at my job and I care for my students. I think the majority of teachers generally feel as I do. To be effective at teaching, I found it was important to have compassion. Passion derives from the Latin *pass (us)*, which literally means to suffer. That is, to have compassion really means “to suffer with.” I have both compassion and passion.

Effective teaching occurs when teachers have a passion for learning. When classrooms lack passion, the results are often a lack of motivation in the learner. It is typical for a student to adopt some of the characteristics and mannerisms of a teacher, so it is logical to assume that a disinterested teacher leads to a disinterested student. Even if we are learning about different things, both the students and I participate actively in the experience of learning. For example, when students are learning about fractions, I am learning about students’ frustration in learning fractions.

One of the benefits about being passionate is it provides a heightened sense of vitality. That is, having passion for something allows for a greater sense of urgency and a greater sense of fortitude. This heightened sense of capacity is valuable when one inevitably encounters an obstacle that could cause the passion to diminish or subside.

Passion allowed me to address obstacles that I encountered while conducting my research; obstacles such as district/bureaucratic procedures regarding teacher research, anxiety about meeting the requirements in the master’s program, and apprehension about how my class might respond should the barriers overcome our collected passion.

My advice to fellow teachers ready to embark on teacher research: you have to believe in your question; it must invade your conscience and provide you with a kind of insistence that provides unbridled enthusiasm. In less grandiose language, know what you do has merit and is valuable. Trust in the merit and value of your actions, and the rest comes easy.

Initially, I had thought that once I had finished my research project and obtained my master’s degree, my time would be over, and my experiences would conclude in a very

Politics, Pragmatics, and Passion

neat, linear way. Much has changed since then. I am confronted with more questions than I ever could have imagined. My research has just begun.

Approaching the Research Question — *Suzanne SooHoo*

Many teacher-researchers engage in a continual self-examination of identity and ideology during the research journey. They wrestle on multiple tiers with their passion for learning, the pragmatics of working through a project, and the politics that shape the process and define the conditions. The most critical moment of reflection is generally at the advent of the project. This is where the initial “paradigm busting” of traditional experimental research occurs and the decision/desire to engage in teacher research takes place. Once the decision is made to move ahead, teachers ask themselves, “Can I do it?”

“When the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear.” (Chinese proverb)

Teacher-researchers in my university class prepare themselves in various ways for their research. Some teachers start their process of inquiry with a specific direction in mind, mere steps away from formulating their research questions. Projects in previous coursework may have inspired them. Perhaps there was something they started but were unable to implement in their own classrooms.

Other teachers are eager to engage in a process of re-looking at their students and their teaching in a new and different way. They are curious about a multitude of “classroom happenings” and are open to a vast array of researchable possibilities. Starting a teacher-research project to answer questions one has not yet consciously asked (Gillespie, 1993) is a very different experience than beginning an inquiry with a specific, clearly formulated question in mind. In the latter, one identifies the question and research methodology and then designs a blueprint. It implies pre-knowing the answer. In the former, the research process is organic, allowing data and methods to emerge from the natural environment of the classroom to inform the research question. This process prepares the teacher-researcher to seek new discoveries and surprises. This open-inquiry encourages teachers to seek actively new ways of knowing and understanding the students and classroom.

At the beginning of a semester, many university students will lament the difficulty of identifying their research question/topic. They struggle to find the ideal question that will make a difference in their classrooms; one that will be professionally and personally meaningful. This struggle, while uncomfortable, is actually a very good starting place. It is better than having a preconceived question because it means the teacher-researcher is truly open to seeing new possibilities in his or her classroom. Teachers who find themselves in this state may be encouraged by Kincheloe (2003) who advised, “Don’t

rush to state a question so your research can begin” (p. 34) because “good research questions are found in the unexpected” (Mackay, 1999, as cited in Hubbard & Power, 1999, p. 35). Many teacher-researchers have found that when they are not looking for the question, it will appear. It crystallizes in some unexpected way from an incident or activity in class, something read, a conversation with a colleague, frustration, or perhaps more importantly, a reflection. By merely thinking about their classroom experiences, teachers are already engaged in research. As with most true insights, a research question or direction usually appears in consciousness after the key elements have been simmering, rather than after tedious analysis (Bloch, 2006).

A common tool for reflection is the teacher-researcher’s daily research journal. The journal serves as both a repository of critical incidents and intellectual musings as well as a data source that can be systematically examined to detect patterns. For example, the number of times they have written about a certain topic may be a possible indicator of a subconscious need to attend to it. “I noticed that most of my journal is about stories of Jeremy.” This type of observation, which is also referred to as preliminary data analysis, sometimes leads teacher-researchers to conclude they should direct their research inquiry toward particular students, focusing on their learning and progress in class.

Another important part of the process is to collect classroom data. Collecting classroom data without a research question/topic keeps teacher-researchers open to the potential significance of any activity and makes them likely to experiment with different forms of data collection. In this regard, one of the teacher-researcher’s favorite exercises is a sociometric survey (Sleeter, 2003). On a grid listing every student’s name, students respond anonymously and check off the names of students with whom (a) they would like to work in a group, (b) they would not prefer to work, and (c) they would like to get to know better. The questions can be adapted depending on grade level. The survey reveals some predictable responses but also some surprises. Teachers reported they found “invisible” kids in this activity: those students who are virtually invisible in the classroom and who are not socially connected to anyone. These preliminary findings are researchable moments. “What conditions contribute to the phenomenon of Olga not appearing on the sociometric list? Maybe I will follow her out to recess today to see with whom she interacts.” Researchable moments often produce a line of inquiry.

Sometimes teacher-researchers collect a great deal of data before discovering their research question/topic. In this process “by re-searching, re-looking, and re-examining that which is familiar, one might discover something strange” (Russian proverb), yet authentic and germane to the workings of a classroom. Then, as if from nowhere, “the question suddenly snaps into consciousness” (Hubbard & Power, 1999, p. 23), thus confirming, “When the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear.”

Politics, Pragmatics, and Passion

Finding the research question is like looking at those “Magic Eye” mazes. The theorizing occurs tacitly (Polyani, 1983), but once you see the picture, you wonder how you ever failed to see it. The research question one finds is a response to a cognitive stirring previously unnamed. Once expressed, the research question appears everywhere because you have been sensing the possibilities all along. One astute teacher-researcher described this phenomenon as similar to his “discovery” of the constellation of stars as a young boy. “The constellation was always there, but I just didn’t recognize it. They were lined up but I didn’t see them before.” Afterwards, there is no returning to not seeing. Another teacher-researcher had similar sentiments:

Why is it when once you identify your research question, you often see data that relate to it the very next instance? When the question/topic is identified, suddenly everything that happens in the classroom is connected to the question. How does focusing make the topic appear everywhere? It is like thinking that you need to buy a blue shirt. You did not realize you had one until you looked. Come to find, when you put them all together, you have a closet full of them.

Politics, Pragmatics, and Passion Inform the Research Direction

From everything teachers can choose to research, why do some teachers choose questions that appear to have so little social value and others dare to question the unquestionable (Kincheloe, 2003)? How does the teacher-researcher decide whether a topic is worthwhile? In the four years I have been teaching the teacher research course, I have found what is worthy of researching is mediated by three conditions: politics, pragmatics, and passion. These conditions, while significant to the formation of a research question/topic, are not separate and discrete, but are interdisciplinary, reciprocally informing each other. Research questions are informed to a certain degree by passion, pragmatics, and politics, separately or in combination.

Politics. Research influenced by politics takes into account the manner in which the innovation is understood within the traditional power structure. The politics within any school system will frame teacher research work within specific parameters to confine innovation. If teacher research studies disrupt the status quo either explicitly or implicitly, political scrutiny of the study comes into play.

Pragmatics. Research that takes into consideration pragmatics is influenced by convenience. The studies are generally encased by time constraints and efficiency, e.g., “I need to do something I can complete by May before I graduate.” Primary motivation is “get-it-done.” Secondary motivation is advancement on the salary scale.

Passion. Research informed by passion allows teacher-researchers to be “egocentric” — to study what genuinely interests them about their classrooms. Teacher-

researchers respond to their internal wonderings. The studies reflect and dignify the teachers' identities, beliefs, and previous experiences.

The argument has been made that everything is political (Freire, 1983). Someone or something benefits whether we act or not. Even when we do nothing, that in itself is a political act; an endorsement of the status quo (SooHoo, 2004). While every teacher-researcher's choice of study is mitigated by politics, pragmatics, and passion, all research directions are political ones.

Teachers' identities and ideologies fuel their passion and embrace their research. The way teachers see themselves — as technicians, nurturers, or social activists — determines which conditions have greater influence on the project. This understanding partly explains why Chris, a humanist, chose to invite his students as co-researchers in his project while Teacher X, a technician, focused on raising test scores. Chris decided to work with kids as owners of their learning conditions. Teacher X decided to “fix the kids” (Hubbard, 1999, p. 24) by focusing on assessment indicators.

Over the years, I have observed novice teachers are comfortable with research questions that, on the surface, are influenced by passion and pragmatics rather than politics. Their intent is to avoid anything that could get them into political trouble, citing lack of tenure as their reason. The conditions in schools that fuel this fear and reluctance may be an explanation of Kincheloe's (2003) observation that teacher-researchers do not typically ask rigorous questions, such as “What is the social role of schooling in a democratic society?” or “What is the political impact of particular educational practices?” (p. 20).

Another reason for the shortage of projects of social and political significance may be “One cannot see what one does not know” (Artzn & Chasse, 2004). That is, one cannot “discover” that which one does not recognize. Columbus (although a myth) could not discover America because he expected India (Artzn & Chasse, 2004). Teachers' research questions reflect their values, past leanings, experiences, and readings. A teacher-researcher with a rich background of educational foundations and philosophy would be comfortable in posing the question, “Schooling, for what purpose?” Teacher-researchers who have previously questioned psychological, social, cultural, and political dimensions of schooling are more likely to risk studying and addressing the political nature of their projects.

Kumashiro (2004) warns there is urgency for teachers to burl into the deep structure of schooling, rather than scratch the superficial veneer, because the consequences of a misdirected research question may have an unanticipated impact. “Teacher research that does not interrupt the oppression already in play may reinforce the very practices that are problematic” (p. 12). The following is a short story that illustrates Kumashiro's point about being thoughtful about reform. It is about a teacher who temporarily lost and then

Politics, Pragmatics, and Passion

regained her footing on what she believed was good for children. Nicole was frustrated about her third graders' behavior. She felt that students ignored and disobeyed her. Her classroom management was not working. Under her management system, students turned over their name cards from green to yellow when they received a warning for misbehavior and from yellow to red when their behavior warranted a time out. Determined to find out why this card system did not curb behavior problems, the teacher convened a series of class meetings during which she asked students for their opinions about how they could make it work. When asked by me, why she sought the children for advice, she said she believed in democratic classrooms and class meetings because students should have the right to construct a better classroom climate. Ultimately, the students decided to add incentives to the system. They wanted to earn "good behavior" tickets, redeemable at the end of the semester for prizes. They realized the card system was flawed; their modification focused on rewarding positive rather than negative behavior.

At first glance, the teacher-researcher thought she had co-designed a better card system, one in which the students had input, and therefore, buy-in. However, as she amassed McDonald's gift certificates, inexpensive trinkets, and pencils for her new incentive program, she realized she had missed the mark. What she believed and what she was implementing were antithetical. She believed in constructivism and democratic classrooms, but she had inadvertently built a new and improved behaviorist mousetrap! In order to interrupt the dominant practice of behaviorism, she would have to recast her project.

Upon deep reflection, she found the problem was rooted in her research question, "Why doesn't our card system affect student behavior?" The question assumed external control modifies behavior. A better question would have been one that more closely mirrored her beliefs about students assuming personal responsibility for their behavior, i.e., "How can the students and I create a classroom culture of social responsibility?" The frame within which the question is worded determines the answers one will find. Her transformed question recognizes the entrenchment of behaviorism in the schools and directs the inquiry into redesigning the status quo. Nicole started with the pragmatics of a broken management system and then evolved into a commitment to social responsibility. Essentially, she politically challenged the deep structure (Tye, 2000) of behaviorism in the school by rejecting a rewards-based system for a democratic classroom. Reflecting on her beliefs made her see things differently. "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes" (Marcel Proust, French novelist, 1871–1922).

Conclusion

Thinking about teacher research together provided new insights to both Chris and Suzanne, concepts they might not have reached on their own. The teacher research class and relationship with the instructor helped Chris to better understand his philosophy and classroom practices. Suzanne tested her theories about the differences in students' research directions with Chris as her confidante. Together they discovered politics, pragmatics, and passion heavily influenced the direction of teacher research. Traveling together on the teacher research journey revealed for Chris and Suzanne, theoretical findings, promising classroom practices, and a desire to travel again.

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