

BOOK REVIEW

Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan L. Lytle (1993). **Inside/Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge**. New York: Teachers College Press.

Traditionally, educational research has operated as a university phenomenon. The issues raised by the research community and the nature of its typically abstract discourse often seem distant and irrelevant to the hard pressed practitioner who in ABE or adult literacy might want to teach phonics more effectively, to “get” students to write *anything*, to find more interesting material and to encourage more consistent attendance. This problem that the authors of *Inside/Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge* identify is part of a more enduring dilemma inherent within the fabric of Western civilization: the radical polarity between the life of the mind and the world of action.

Academics have developed an ethnographic approach in more recent times as a way of bringing theorists and practitioners in closer proximity. While opening up provocative new space for research, particularly in the realm of local studies, the underlying issues and ideological slants inherent in such work are often of more concern to the academy than to those of most practitioners. Thus, despite their considerable empathy to the milieu of various educational settings, ethnographers have not been able to close this enigmatic gap, notwithstanding their important contributions in shedding light on a wide host of local socio-educational environments.

Enter Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle in their path breaking study, *Inside/Out: Teacher Research and Knowledge*. The authors do not assume to invent a field. Rather, they provide a comprehensive examination of teacher research in the first part of the book, while offering 21 examples drawn from elementary, secondary and adult education in the second part. My comments will focus on Cochran-Smith and Lytle's interpretive essays.

The authors define teacher research simply as “systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers” (p. 7). Moreover, they interpret it as “emic” (p. 18) or insider’s knowledge, grounded within the intellectual frameworks and life experiences of teachers, themselves. The authors maintain that this “view...is different from that of an outside observer, even if that observer assumes an ethnographic stance and spends considerable time in the classroom” (p. 18).

The author of the book's forward, Frederick Erickson observes that in teacher research, “*the concrete has an irreducible centrality and dignity*” (p. viii) (original emphasis). It is not, as he states, that teacher researchers “do not deal with abstraction” (p. viii). In fact, they must deal with abstractions if their discourses are to move beyond the merely anecdotal and normative. Unlike academic discourse, however, teacher research starts with the most compelling issues identified by *teachers* who then may integrate theory, observation and case-study material eclectically to better understand such issues and to improve current teaching based upon their own developing criteria. A critical “emic” factor of the teacher's assessment of the learning climate is the relationship she/he perceives between opportunities and constraints that may be illuminated by academic insight, but grasped ultimately from one's embedment within the local context.

Teacher research is driven, moreover, not only by the concrete issues of classroom dynamics, but by the intellectual, social and emotional universe of teachers, some of whom may draw extensively on an academic idiom, others who may eschew such discourse altogether. Cochran-Smith's and Lytle's bold thesis is that the specific form that teacher research may take is less important than that it draws on the creative cutting edge of teachers' intellectual universe and experiential knowledge. Through “systematic, intellectual inquiry,” it compels a critical reflection that expands the borders of understanding which may enhance classroom practice in ways not possible simply through lesson planning and in-service training that focuses primarily on the refinement of technique.

Notwithstanding this open-ended view, the authors provide a “working typology” for teacher research consisting of teacher journals, oral inquiries, classroom studies and teacher

essays. Although Cochran-Smith and Lytle distinguish between “empirical” and “conceptual” research, in practice they are invariably intertwined in the sense that description is inherently selective and therefore interpretive. Still, their implicit point that one or the other emphasis might be more overt in particular studies is well taken and speaks, moreover, to the importance of cumulative and collaborative work in teacher research if the field is ever to attain the level of legitimacy and importance that the authors seek.

Journals allow scope for the expression of emotional insight unlimited by traditional disciplinary constraints. They provide a way of capturing the immediacy of classroom experience which might easily be forgotten, which over time can serve as a historical record, a running commentary of the “inner world” of a classroom. Teachers can extract journal material out for classroom discussion or for a more extended analysis in conjunction with other insights and theoretical work. (For examples of teacher research on journals, see pages 121-149).

One of the most creative and potentially workable areas of teacher research is what the authors refer to as “oral inquiry,” an intensive form of collaborative inquiry which if carefully developed establishes a form of “systematic, intentional, inquiry” which Cochran-Smith and Lytle establish as an axiomatic criteria of teacher research. According to the authors:

Oral inquiry processes are procedures in which two or more teachers jointly research their experiences by examining particular texts (including students' work), and other data about students. These processes are unique in our typology ...in that they are by definition collaborative and oral. During oral inquiry, teachers build on one another's insights to analyze and interpret classroom data and their experiences in the school as a workplace....[O]ral inquiry processes often follow specific theoretically grounded procedures and routines, require careful preparation and collection of data, and rely on careful documentation that enables teachers to revisit and reexamine their joint analysis (p. 30).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle maintain the oral inquiry should not simply be linked with “teacher talk.” Rather, it engages a more systematic process requiring preparation, data collection and careful documentation and analysis.

Typically, a particular topic is chosen and participants initially engage in a “reflective conversation” around key aspects, words or images that surround a topic. The next stage is description of a single student's work related to the topic at hand. Slowly and carefully the group explores the nuances of the work, guarding against premature overly theoretical interpretations that are not directly grounded in the descriptive evidence at hand. The third stage is staff review and recommendations for improving practice. (For examples of oral inquiry, see pages 159-170).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle also point out the value of creating an archival data base from the oral inquiries as an on-going tool for teacher development and as a source for scholars to access the rich insights and observation of daily classroom experience. Such an archive also serves as a historical repository of a program, valuable for the preservation of institutional memory. Long term institutional studies of local programs and agencies are sorely lacking which could add considerable insight into the phenomenon of adult literacy education. This is a critical observation that schools, agencies and programs might well consider.

Classroom studies are broad-based works which enable a teacher to explore classroom or program dynamics comprehensively. Often these are collaborative efforts and are largely descriptive, although inevitably, even if only implicitly, interpretive. Cochran-Smith and Lytle include several examples of classroom studies including one written by 14(!) authors. (See pages 170-240 for examples of classroom studies).

According to the authors' typology, teacher essays represent the most conceptual type of teacher research, although they would agree that all descriptive analysis is interpretive. This type of research most closely resembles the work produced at the universities and is sometimes published in traditional academic journals. Yet its focus is considerably different than much traditional scholarship in that “it is often personal, retrospective, and based on the ‘narrow’ perspective of a single teacher” (p. 36). Unlike academic research which is primarily concerned with the exploration and refinement of theoretical issues that may use case-study material as supportive evidence, the teacher essayist is most concerned with resolving perplexities or

explaining phenomenon that arise in the classroom and perhaps to draw on scholarly theory to amplify experience. That is:

teachers use their own interpretive frameworks as practitioners to provide a truly emic [insider's] view that is different from that of an outside observer...Teachers' essays attempt to answer questions through systematic investigation and reflection on *experience*. (p. 36, emphasis added).

Of significant importance according to the authors is that teacher research essays often point to contradictions between academic theory and actual practice, which in turn, could help to restructure the canon not only of practice, but theory, itself. Although little work has been accomplished in this area, such breakthroughs in theoretical reconstruction are essential if the insights of teacher research are going to truly influence the broad range of the community of researchers not only in education, but in the related fields of sociology, literary theory, history, and psychology. By starting from a phenomenological perspective and working outward toward an incorporation of critical theory in a wide array of potential disciplines for the purpose of explaining experience, such canon reconstruction that teacher research *could* engender could be rather startling.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle are well aware that *currently*, teacher research holds only marginal status among most teachers and within the educational research community. The theory/practice split articulated at the beginning of this piece remains pervasive among both sectors. It would be truly radical and in my view unlikely that teacher research will move to the forefront of teacher education and practice as the authors envision. Yet, it holds the potential of moving beyond its current fringe status if those teachers interested in this type of practitioner research and supportive academic scholars work systematically to enhance the legitimacy of the field.

As the authors point out, the field is still in an early stage of development and there is much to work out: second order analysis of existing studies, the expansion and collection of a much more extensive body of work, the development of a flexible set of criteria that clearly

distinguishes teacher research from other types of staff development, and establishing formal linkages with academic scholars. A more reflective approach to teaching that draws on the insights of practitioner researchers would also be of considerable value in legitimizing the field among broader sectors of the educational establishment.

While one of the major purposes of teacher research is to improve practice, its other value is to shed provocative personal insight on the phenomenology of teaching, including a richly historical dimension of local contexts. Thus, even when change does not seem directly imminent, the classroom teacher is still able to achieve a sense of empowerment by probing beneath the surface in discovering some of the “deep structures” that shape the social and cultural environment of the classroom. Such probes sometimes lead to change, whether ephemeral or more enduring. At other times, their primary value is simply the deepening awareness of socio-cultural forces at work within students, teachers, institutions and within the broader society that may enhance one's sense of literacy and through that, one's personal, social and cultural sense of being. For an educator, either of these outcomes may be of value and would represent significant progress over the current status quo. Cochran-Smith and Lytle have made a major contribution to educational studies and practice by opening up the field of teacher research to a potentially wide audience of practitioners and theorists.

Despite their hopes for this emerging field, they maintain a critical awareness of the many dilemmas that still face those of us who seek to establish through teacher research a canonical restructuring of what is considered legitimate scholarship that simultaneously enhances local educational environments. This would prove no mean accomplishment, but one worthy of considerable effort.

Lest this review end on too positive a note, let me add two caveats that have at least perplexed this teacher researcher and which as well, I believe, point to some of the broader dilemmas that site based practitioners face when attempting to probe into the meaning of their own experience as educators and of the settings in which they are so much embedded. The first tension revolves around the quest to draw on research to improve the educational setting on the

one hand, against the specter of alienation and anomie which such probes may set off, on the other hand. The second tension, clearly related, is that between the authentic democratic impulses which inform *Inside/Outside*, against the special spheres of knowledge that a research orientation often reinforces.

In a follow-up article to the book, Lytle (1993) has pointed to some of these dilemmas. Specifically, she is concerned about teacher research becoming a “buzzword,” and the danger of “teacher-proof cookbooks” (p. 20) that could co-opt this burgeoning field. Instead, she wants to preserve the “problematic” nature of the field which on her reading challenges the status quo on fundamental matters:

The real stuff of teacher research isn't “safe.” It is radical and passionate, deeply personal and profoundly political-richly embedded in situations where the teacher's stance on her own practice and intellectual life *matter*, and where teachers work lives, commitments, and relationships are complex and entangled (p. 21).

While I agree with all of this, there are other issues as well which might challenge the democratic impetus in *Inside/Outside* that Lytle may be implicitly questioning in this latter piece. The dilemma the authors need to face is what if the vast majority of educators, for whatever reasons, have no desire to participate in the kind of vigorous reflective research that they are promoting. If, in fact, most do not, then what are teacher researchers to do? Following the democratic impulse, they may in fact move to simplify the field through “cookbook” type recipes which do purport to resolve particular problems teachers face daily. This I would label as the praxeological turn. On the other hand, they may desire to push the envelop of their own understanding, creativity, and intellectual passion by pointing to issues and problems that very well defy “solutions” in any proximate sense. This I would refer to as the critical turn and could move the field to a closer alliance with traditional academic researchers.

What makes this tension so difficult to resolve is due in part to what the political philosopher William E. Connolly refers to as “The Ambiguity of Democracy” (1987). Connolly argues that “The danger does not flow merely from forces hostile to democracy,” as Lytle argues in her more recent piece. Rather, “It resides within the ideal itself” (p. 1). Taking a tack from

the 19th century French aristocratic observer of American political institutions and social mores, Alexis de Tocqueville, Connolly argues that the democratic impulse reinforces a conformist tendency toward massification as much as it does to the ideal of equality. On this reading, Lytle's concern over mass produced teacher research recipes has a more perplexing root than its co-optation by national education publishing companies or other agencies of repressive capitalism, as pernicious as these may be.

The conflict that progressive, participatory educators need to face is between the apparent contradiction on the one hand of a radical egalitarian populism, which may lead as well to massification and conformity, and the need on the other hand for the special insight of educational experts who can establish the framework and criteria for this complicated new type of research for which the authors are calling. While teacher research stems from the "lived experiences" of students and teachers (populism), sophisticated interpretations by practitioners will require a level of knowledge and a certain literary sensitivity that is not equally distributed across the social landscape (elitism). This does not mean that knowledge can not be enhanced and shared through teacher research, but in order to move beyond the fringe (forget the forefront), this field will have to mature with all the intellectual sophistication and social acumen that its practitioners can possibly muster. This will require its proponents to live within the ambiguous spaces *between* populism and elitism which a "critical" democracy requires.

If the field of teacher research is to build on the insights of Cochran-Smith and Lytle, then, it seems inevitable that the lead will be taken by a (self) selective body of teachers willing and able to struggle with the issues articulated by the authors. While creating communities of sorts, such teacher research is also likely to create chasms of alienation between its practitioners and more "mainstream" teachers. To go forward with teacher-research in a sustained disciplined way may require an embracing of the pain of alienation as the price to pay to engage in cutting-edge work that paradoxically, may or may not improve practice as well. Yet, to ignore the challenge of Cochran-Smith and Lytle's stimulating thesis is to flirt with anti-intellectualism, a problem that the field of adult literacy education must work hard to overcome. It has to resist

this temptation even while struggling to make its insights immediately germane to the field. This is a tall order and perhaps impossible to achieve in any widespread institutional sense, but for those of us committed to literacy as a metaphor for meaning making and knowledge, we have no choice but to pursue it.

Notwithstanding these concerns, *Inside/Outside* provides an intriguing roadmap that those of us enticed would do well to flesh out with all the skill and creativity we can possibly muster. We would do well to build on the firm foundation of Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan L. Lytle.

REFERENCES

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George Demetrion
Manager of Community-Based Programming
Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford
Gdemetrion@juno.com