

CHAPTER 1

*A Practitioner's Retrospective*¹

INTRODUCTION: THE PICTURE ALBUMS OF A PROSAIC HISTORY

Later on today, I will get up from my computer and begin a task I look forward to as both joy and drudgery: sifting through the piles of photographs that have accumulated in a box in the corner of my study. Each time I collect developed film from my local pharmacy, I vow this will be the time I will put the pictures immediately in an album. I even buy albums occasionally, and they sit forlornly next to the box stuffed with yellow envelopes that hold the visions of my memories of the past few years. Once I begin the task of reviewing those snapshots, I know I will respond as I have responded before: oohing and aahing over a particularly cute picture of my sons, saying, "I can't believe how much they've changed!"; noticing for the first time an acquaintance relegated to the background of a shot who has since become an important friend; wondering why I ever took five shots of that particular tree, unsure as to where it is and why it was important to me at the time; but mostly conjuring up a wealth of memories and emotions, amazed as ever that these still pictures can produce such strong reactions in me. Often, when I look through a particular set of pictures taken randomly over the course of some months, I see connections among the shots, themes that emerge as I arrange the pictures in an album. I can see, for example, the development of my older son's motor skills across these stills: He's grasping a spoon, sitting up against our dog, standing and holding onto a chair, climbing into his kiddie pool, jumping into a pile of leaves. Individual moments suggest a moving scenario for me, and I remember far more than the pictures can show: the tears as he fell over when the dog moved; the thirty-three steps taken in a row on the first day he really started walking; the time he slid down the slide in his kiddie pool, landing flat on

¹An earlier version of this chapter appears in *English Education*, May 1993.

his back, screaming for us to rescue him from the four inches of water.

As I imagine the task that lies ahead, it gives me a way to think about the one at hand: explaining my forays into teacher-research and my shifting understanding of that work over the past seven years. The picture album becomes an apt metaphor for me: As a teacher, I have accumulated memories of my classrooms much as I accumulate pictures. The fragmented stills—a snippet of a conversation with a student, a particularly memorable paper, musings in a personal journal about a certain lesson or occasion in the classroom—alone remain a jumble of memories, at times leaving me perplexed as to why the vision still intrudes upon my memory. It is only when I have taken the time to reflect, to rethink, and to rearrange these images that I begin to understand their significance. Over the years, I have taken time to do that with my teaching, composing these images into stories of my classrooms, stories which pull together the fragments as I have tried to connect what at first may have seemed disconnected, as I have searched for the patterns which impose meaning on the individual images.

What I write about in this volume builds and extends upon this metaphor. Just as I have shelves of already completed picture groups arranged chronologically in appropriately titled albums (“Wedding,” “Trip to England,” “Seth’s First Year”), I have composed over the past several years a series of case studies based in my own experiences as a teacher-researcher in various classrooms (“Sarah’s Story,” “Akemi’s Story,” “A Collaboratively Taught Class,” “A Collaborative Research Project with Susan and John”). Until quite recently, these studies have sat quietly in their files on my computer or have been presented to others in the abridged form of articles and presentations, as separate from each other as those individual albums on the book shelf. Lately, however, I’ve been thinking about the connections across those case studies, across those albums. Given the perspective that time allows, when I look across my picture albums now, I resee these events whose meaning I created in my painstaking arrangement of particular photographs. I begin to understand in new ways why I put certain pictures together as I did, and, in so doing, I begin to understand some new things about myself as photographer and chronicler of these events. In like manner, as I review the various case studies I have written, I see new things about myself as writer and researcher: themes which emerge

across cases, themes which emerge about the act of research itself, growth and change in myself as a researcher. It is only in this act of looking *across* the case studies that I can begin to identify both patterns about the research methodology which I took for granted at the time of conducting the research and also those patterns about myself as researcher, a look which helps me continue my own growth and development.

My colleague Patti Stock suggested that my reflections on my experiences as a classroom researcher sound and read like a history of teacher-research in this country, as many of us who practice research in our own classrooms have changed over time and developed our understandings of what classroom-based research can be. In light of that connection between my story and others, in this book, I try to sift through the photo albums of my classroom research over the past seven years to make a particular point: The practice of teacher-research has a history, a history which can be found in the practices of the individuals who apply its art. I'm not talking here about the history of the movement as described by Susan Lytle and Marilyn Cochran-Smith and others, a history which explains to us the development of teacher-research from Stenhouse onward, a history focused in what the leaders of the movement have inscribed for other practitioners (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, "Research on Teaching"). This history, an important history, seems to me to focus primarily on the theoretical development of teacher-research from Stenhouse to Britton to Goswami: on the theoreticians who work with teachers, look at what the teachers have said, and help to create a theoretical construct from that. As a teacher-researcher, I celebrate this history which has helped shape my own vision of classroom research in vital ways.

But in this essay, I'm talking about another kind of history, a *prosaic* history of teacher-research (to borrow from Louise Phelps)—a history that has been inscribed by those of us who have been doing it even when we didn't always know what we were doing, a down-in-the-trenches discussion of the development of those of us who practice teacher-research and have been influenced by what we read and what we do in the classroom. Important books exist in our history, books which contain a series of practical projects, such as those undertaken by Glenda Bissex, by Nancie Atwell, by the teachers whose work is found in the critical volumes by Goswami and Stillman, Lytle and Cochran-Smith, and

Branscombe, Goswami, and Schwartz. These projects can be seen as the picture albums of the teacher-research movement, the everyday collections of stories and projects that teachers have conducted to make sense of the worlds of the classrooms in which they live. What I will argue here is that projects such as those described in these books, projects conducted by teachers, when seen over time, represent the fascinating change and development of this grassroots movement in another way, in a way that creates its own history and theory. What I am attempting to do here is reread across one teacher's picture albums—my own—in order to represent some of that history, as I demonstrate the growth and change I have experienced as a member of the teacher-research movement.

Because teacher-research is more than a method—is, in fact, a way of thinking about issues of power and representation and storytelling and much more—its very existence and development are dependent upon our understanding not only of the particular issue we are researching but also of the complexities of the research process itself. My own dynamic development as a teacher-researcher, in other words, has depended not only on my interest in my students' literacy (the subject I have chosen to pursue) but also on my constant reevaluation and rethinking of what it means to conduct research in the way that I do. For many of us who practice classroom-based research, the pertinent issue is no longer one of the relative value of qualitative versus quantitative research, although this debate is an important one and represented a starting point for discussion for many of us. The question is no longer simply a matter of how to make our voices as teacher-researchers more powerful, although that, again, is an important debate and one that many of us see as vital to our work. The issues have changed dramatically over the past few years, to the point where many of us now are looking to the fields of anthropology and various philosophies in order to investigate the very nature of the research experience. As we seek to discover what it means to be a researcher and represent the experience of another, many of us have begun to wonder how this role of representer is integrally tied to issues of power.

Like many teacher-researchers, I believe that our continual posing of new questions in order to develop our understanding of the research process depends largely on the integration of our practical projects with our program of reading. The projects in

which I have been involved over the past seven years have taken me into a variety of settings, from rural to urban, and given me the opportunity to work with a number of different students, from high school to college level, from those labeled “basic” to those labeled “gifted.” The program of reading in which I have been simultaneously engaged has taken me into a variety of theoretical discourses: theories in the social sciences, theories in literacy learning and literacy use, theories in feminist studies, as well as theories in teacher-research. My interactions with the people with whom I have been working and the texts I have been reading informed each other: As teacher-researcher I read theoretical texts from a practical perspective; as reader of theoretical texts, I practiced teacher-research from a theoretical perspective.

And so in this book—and particularly in this first chapter—I will share a number of pictures taken from my own albums of teacher-research over the past several years. As I have arranged these images, I have attempted to trace my reflections about teacher-research, both at the time each particular image was inscribed in my memory and at the present time as I see each image in its overall place in my own growth and development. In order to do so, I look at both the practical projects in which I have been involved and the program of reading which paralleled that involvement. Looking carefully now at these understandings, I can see changes particularly in three areas: first, in my shifting comprehension of literacy and literacy education, and especially in how these politically charged terms take shape for students, their teachers, and researchers in terms of form and genre; second, in my shifting stance toward the methods I took on as researcher in order to learn how students understand their literacy and their literacy learning which they described to me in terms of form and genre; and third, in my shifting conceptions of what teacher-research can and—I will argue—should be.

In this first chapter, then, I will overview my experiences as a teacher-researcher, briefly exposing the reader to the classrooms in which I worked, the questions which arose out of my experience in each classroom, and the changes in my own understanding which grew out of my reflections on each project, mingled with the reading I was doing at the time. In subsequent chapters, I offer two additional means for the reader to look with me at these experiences: First, the bulk of each chapter is an actual write-up of a

teacher-research project, composed at the time I ended work in each classroom, write-ups which, warts and all, can show the reader the details of my method at various moments in my history as well as the thought processes which informed such method. Second, in pre- and postscripts to each chapter, I point out to the reader certain issues to notice in her reading: issues that I can see *now* as informing ones, issues about method and theory which are reflected in the words of the texts and which have helped me see the complexities of the research process I have undertaken. By exposing readers to both the actual write-ups and my reflections, I hope to show that teacher-research is, more than anything else, an evolving process. The write-ups of the teacher-research studies that we all read (and admire immensely for their depth and confidence) represent a moment in time for their researchers, carefully crafted renditions of the research experience as it seems at the moment. Seldom as teacher-researchers do we have the opportunity to publicly revisit such research: to re-see how we looked at a particular issue, to re-vise the methodology, to re-define the important terms, to be able to say, "Hey, I think differently about that now." But all of us who are reflective about our classroom practices and who take the time to compose our adventures into prose do grow and change and rethink our approaches—such reflection is the very basis of teacher-research. We are not satisfied ultimately with each attempt; we return to the very basis of our method with each new project in our neverending quest to "do better next time," to get close to capturing the spirit of the teaching and learning enterprise in our classroom. By laying out for you here my series of attempts at teacher-research along with my hindsight commentary about what I learned in order to change, I hope to model a way of thinking about classroom research, a model of constant reevaluation that we all need to adopt, I believe, in order to keep this movement alive and evolving.

I ask the reader to see my story, then, as a reflection of the story of many teacher-researchers and to recognize the changes I have made as constitutive of some of the developments many of us have made in this important movement of research and teaching. My hope is that, as you read through these pictures, you will respond in kind with pictures of your own and, in so doing, expand these reflections to make sense in your own lives and worlds.

THE MANTLE OF RESEARCH: LEARNING TO REMOVE
THE ARMOR

A first memory of teaching: August 31, 1980. I am 23 years old. I walk into my first day of high school teaching an hour early, well armed with lesson plans, "Big Blue" (the curriculum guide for the school district), practical ideas gleaned from years of academic training preparing me for this day. As a former English major with a master's degree specializing in the teaching of writing, I know about The Writing Process, New Criticism, Reliability and Validity, Techniques to Reduce the Paperload, and Performance and Behavioral Objectives. Like all new teachers, though, I don't know much about the living and breathing adolescents whom I will meet in 60 short minutes. Soon I will face five different classes of students, all aware that I am The New Teacher. They all know each other well, having survived ten years of other teachers, living in a connected community, a community in which I don't yet have an apartment. I ransacked the closet earlier this morning, changing clothes five times as I searched for the outfit that would best cover my fears and help me project that professional yet friendly persona I kept reading about in college. I have been awake since 4:30 . . . after having fallen asleep at 1:15. I am running on adrenaline and caffeine and I have my carefully prepared lesson plans clutched in my trembling hands as I stand in front of my room, *my room*, with its meager assortment of books and hastily assembled bulletin boards. I am filled with panic.

Every teacher I know now can relate a first-day scenario much like this one which remains indelibly stamped in her brain. Veteran teachers often recall with rueful laughter those first days when the gulf between the theories of academia and the practices of the classroom seemed too wide to ever span. When I think back now to my first years of teaching, the metaphor of armor seems appropriate. As a new teacher, I sank into the safe protection that the armor of my academic training provided. I wore that armor proudly: I had spent energy and time learning the latest techniques and the theoretical rationales, and I kept that knowledge in the forefront, relying on that knowledge to help me through difficult moments in the classroom.

As an undergraduate and graduate student in English Educa-

tion, I had learned about teaching through the lenses of what Garth Boomer called “Big R research.” In course after course I was exposed to studies about teaching and learning conducted by outsiders to the classroom—usually university researchers who used what seemed to me at the time a logical scientific method to conduct their studies. Reading between the lines of their rather dense write-ups, I eventually came to detect a pattern as to how the research was conducted: University professors would start from a hypothesis about how students learn and then look in on some clearly defined slice of the students’ school lives for a specific period of time in order to draw some conclusions and suggest some generalizations. Then, after having collected their data, these researchers would return to their own settings—usually the university or some research agency—and write up their results in the form of a study or a grant. Eventually, some of these studies would be translated into teacher texts, how-to books or exercise exchanges loosely based on the original studies.

As an eager devourer of these studies and texts, I took their conclusions to heart, trying to learn as much as I could about these ideas before I began teaching, appreciating the work that had gone into such studies and anxious to try out all that I was learning. I read in detail studies which used control groups and experimental groups to determine the feasibility of one teaching technique over another; I studied papers in which researchers watched children through mirrors so that they would be unobtrusive in their observations so as not to skew the results. And so, as I began teaching, my head was filled with visions of T units and pause time, sentence combining and IRE questioning techniques, all based in sound scientific research. I felt as if I had all the right stuff—now all I had to do was fill the kids up with these great ideas and exercises.

Through all this training I never once thought of myself as someone capable of contributing to this body of research. Mostly I learned how to respond to what was already out there awaiting my consumption. I dutifully memorized the five parts of a research study; I became proficient in distinguishing the reliability and validity of a study; I learned to say “interesting but flawed” when confronted with what I was told were less objective measures of research; I began to speak of contamination as I was taught about the importance of purity of samplings in control and experimental

groups. Research, I decided, was something only well-trained, statistics-minded persons (i.e., not me) could conduct.

Within this training, I remember in particular my response when I read for the first time a different kind of research: Janet Emig's *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*. What I saw in that work was Emig's attempt to talk *with* students about their writing, rather than merely to observe them in the ways I had been taught. I saw Emig using the students' own responses as the basis of her unfolding understanding, rather than relying solely on her own reactions. For the first time in these courses filled with statistics and quantitative measurements, I immersed myself in some research that spoke to me in meaningful ways about literacy, in ways I could understand and respond to in kind—but I masked that reaction in keeping with the perspective of the research world in which I was being educated. I convinced myself that Emig's study was an exception, an interesting exception, but certainly not in keeping with the knowledge I was acquiring in my other Ed. school courses.

When I graduated, I was grateful that I was leaving the world of research for one of teaching. Practical measures were more up my alley, I thought. Those studies were interesting and had helped me acquire a battery of techniques, but my interest was in the practice and not the theory. And, as had been drummed into my head, both at a conscious and a subconscious level, ne'er the twain shall meet.

An early introduction to research: December 1982. A note from my supervisor arrives in my classroom asking me to come down to her office during my free period next hour. As my class ends and I walk down the hall, I think about the progress these students are making. In this, my second year of teaching literature and writing, mostly to classes of severely learning-disabled students, I have been trying to adapt the "regular curriculum" in writing to these students whose writing skills are far different from anything I ever studied at the university. I teach 4 classes a day of 10–15 students each, serve as an advisor and counselor to 7 of these students, preparing their IEPs, taking them on field trips, meeting regularly with their families. In addition, I teach an advanced composition course for 30 of the "regular kids." I love this mix of assignments. While my lack of training in learning disabilities appalls me, my training in the teaching of writing has helped me adjust, adapt, introduce these kids to more than the

formulaic, mind-dulling curriculum they have been used to in their English classes: filling in forms, writing resumes, answering multiple-choice questions about their reading. I think about the growth Jill and Charlie are making, and I can't wait to tell my supervisor about it. I burst into her office full of excitement. "You'll never guess what Jill did today! She actually participated in a peer group with Charlie and helped him revise his essay. She did a great job asking questions about sentences she didn't understand, and Charlie actually took the criticism well! And, you know how I got that class of seniors reading *Ordinary People*? Well, yesterday I showed them the movie version of the book and Frank—you know Frank who has never read a book in his life—told me that the movie wasn't nearly as good as the book, because he really imagined the characters differently. So now he's going to write about the differences and why the book characters seemed more real!" My supervisor smiles. "Slow down, Cathy! You know I'm really pleased with the progress you're making with those kids. In fact that's one of the reasons I asked you in here today. I'm thinking about putting together a book about teaching students with learning disabilities, and I was wondering if you'd be interested in writing the section on teaching writing?" I am immediately overwhelmed and panicked. What do I know about this subject? What could I possibly write that anyone else would want to read? I've never even taken a course in learning disabilities; I've just adapted and adjusted as best I could what I know about teaching writing. I plan my approach: After school that day, I'll drive to the district curriculum library and ask the librarians to help me run an ERIC search about learning disabilities and writing. I know that once I have the ERIC search grasped tightly in my hands, I will feel less panicked. The research skills I learned in my own training will pay off: The studies I'll read will help me formulate some thesis and discussion about the subject, much like those papers I had written that had been emblazoned with A's in my undergraduate and graduate experience.

Looking for research in all the right places had been impressed on me for my entire educational life. And so, when asked to compose an essay about learning-disabled students, I never even considered writing about my own experiences with those forty students whose lives had become now so intertwined with mine. ERIC, I knew, represented "real" research, and I duly believed that the studies I uncovered would tell me more "truth" than anything I might learn from Charlie and Jill and Frank and all the other

students I worked with hour after hour, day after day. Like many teachers, I denigrated the reliability of my own lived experience, my own perspective, in favor of the work of researchers who clearly had never set foot in my classroom.

This perspective remained at the forefront of all my teaching in those days. As I continued to teach writing to all levels of students, I tried to put into effect many of the techniques I had learned. When students had trouble writing complex sentences, I pulled out a book of sentence-combining exercises to give them practice. Because I knew about *The Writing Process*, I required kids to complete a five-step process for every paper, complete with a check list for each step. I pulled out the exercise exchange list that I had developed over the years from the books and journals I had read, and practiced a variety of techniques that I had been told were tried and true.

Some students seemed to “get it”; some students didn’t. Some classes were turned on to reading and writing; some weren’t. At first, along with many of my colleagues, when a lesson didn’t work, I blamed the kids: either they weren’t trying hard enough or else they had forgotten everything they had been taught by other teachers. I had worked through these great plans to entertain and instruct; so what was wrong with them that they didn’t/wouldn’t/couldn’t respond?

Blaming the kids got me nowhere, so I turned to blaming teachers: first the other teachers and then myself. “Why didn’t the tenth-grade teacher prepare the students better?” I would moan to my sympathetic colleagues. “How can I possibly get students to believe in the writing process when all their other teachers don’t even ask them to write?” Finally, I began blaming myself: If I could just write more exciting plans, if I just worked harder preparing good lessons, if I could just write perfect comments on their papers, I could inspire these kids. And I turned back to the lessons I had been taught, desperately desiring that missing element which all the teachers in the books I read seemed to possess.

Eventually, my search for blame shifted to the theorists themselves. I was in good company as I began to develop a them-versus-us mentality. “They” were the ones who developed the theories; “we” were the ones who put the theories into practice. “They” were the ones who got time, grants, and research assistants to conduct their research; “we” were the ones who ran our own dittos, developed lesson plans in the wee hours of the morning, and

faced kids hour after hour, day after day. “They,” we said in the teachers’ lounge quite often, “have no idea what happens in the real world of school. Let them try teaching their theories for a few weeks and they’ll see what it’s really like.”

Not surprisingly, blaming this group did me little good. Even though I felt let down by the theory they had given me, I had nowhere to turn for new theory. As an overwhelmed beginning teacher who poured all my energy into surviving my day, I had no time to read journals or books or to attend conferences, to try to find new theories to replace the ones I was working from. And so, like many of my colleagues, I complained and I cried . . . but I mostly stayed within the ways I had been taught to teach. I felt I had no other choice.

Frustrated by my experiences but still committed to the teaching of writing and anxious to understand how I could do better, I returned to graduate school in 1985. Once there, I began to realize that I did have a choice. As I was introduced to the notion of teacher-research, I saw some hope for connecting the worlds of theory and practice which, up to that point, had seemed closed down to me. I began to see myself as a “kidwatcher,” to use Goodman’s term, learning to be a theory maker myself as I started to reflect on my own practice and to rely on those reflections to help me understand the unique contexts of the classrooms in which I taught. I learned not to toss out the studies and research on which I had cut my teeth but, rather, to place that research where it belongs: as part of a whole rather than *the* whole, as useful background which might help me begin my own reflection and study of my own local circumstances.

As I learned more about teacher-research, I began to see just how much it differed from the kind of research which had become second nature to me. I learned that more traditional research had been named in a variety of ways by a number of people over the years—as the positivist paradigm, as the natural scientific research model, as decontextualized or separatist research, as “Big R research,”—and had been criticized in an equal number of ways from a variety of stances.² For my purposes here, I limit my objections to methodology: to the paradigm’s reliance on decontext-

²Among those who lay out serious critiques of this paradigm from varying perspectives are Donald Schon in *The Reflective Practitioner*, Loren Barritt in “Reflections on a Change of Mind,” Valerie Suransky in *The Erosion of Childhood*, and Marcia Westkott in “Feminist Criticisms of the Social Sciences.”

ualized studies. Traditional researchers, in order to fulfill their research mission, always seemed to limit what they could talk about in the classrooms they visited. Because they had to strip away as much context as possible in order to isolate some kind of variable (which would then be used to separate a control group from an experimental group), these researchers seemed to focus on one specific or another—in striking contrast to the teachers I knew who had to see the classroom in its contextual fullness. Because classroom teachers recognize that students are multidimensional people who are more than the sum of discrete, isolable variables, they often cannot see the connection between the traditional research of these outsiders and the reality that exists within their classrooms. This fullness of teacher-research appealed to me. Teachers who spend innumerable hours with their students and are responsible and responsive to the teaching and learning which occurs in the classroom seemed to me to be in a better position than visiting researchers to see their students and their classrooms as they really exist: Thus, they are able to complicate and problematize the settings in which they work, able to look into the depth and degree of difference which exist in classrooms.

I began to recognize as well that compounding the problem presented by the difference in understanding between outside researchers and classroom teachers is the value placed on the knowledge each group is able to produce, a difference discussed by Steve North in *The Making of Knowledge in the Field of Composition*. North believes that theory and practice, at least in composition studies, are too often disparate entities: Theory is molded by theorists and researchers who see themselves (and are seen by much of the world) as separate from teachers. Theorists and researchers are granted a status in the world quite different from that of classroom teachers: Theorists and researchers unfortunately are seen as more knowledgeable, more sophisticated, more reliable than teachers, as North tells the story. Teachers' knowledge has too often been relegated to the world of lore, and this world is seen as inhospitable to and intolerant of activities that support legitimate research and theory building.³

Teacher-research, with its emphasis on *context-full* study, works toward debunking this notion. Convinced that educational

³For an intriguing discussion of the connection between theory and practice and its relation to teacher-research, see Ruth Ray's *The Practice of Theory: Teacher Research in Composition*.

research must account for the multidimensional and multifaceted nature of teaching and learning, the movement believes that classroom teachers are uniquely positioned to conduct such studies. Present day in and day out, teachers are able to observe classrooms in their fullness: They are able to observe their teaching and their students' learning, and are able to reflect productively on the relationships between that teaching and that learning. When teachers observe at a local level the situations of concern for them in their own lived worlds, they call their own horizons into question. By first looking critically at their particular experiences as teachers in particular classrooms, and by then reflecting on recurring themes in those particular experiences in order to make sense of the complex world that exists in their classrooms, teacher-researchers prepare themselves to create worthwhile learning environments, to develop purposeful curricula, to devise productive methods of teaching. Such practice is what Paulo Freire calls "praxis": critical reflection and action that changes conditions of being in the world.

The teacher-research movement looks to define the research paradigm differently from the separatist scenario: Teachers in classrooms research themselves and their students, and accordingly make appropriate changes in their own classrooms. The assumption underlying this stance is that teachers who are intimately involved in the complex context of the classroom are best able to see into the dynamics in it. The implication of such a stance, then, is one that elevates the status of teachers and equates their theory-making ability with that of researchers.⁴

After my initial excitement about discovering this new movement, I was surprised to find out it was not such a new movement after all. I learned teacher-research had a history of its own, first becoming popular among teachers in Great Britain in the 1960s. I read Jon Nixon's important book, *A Teacher's Guide to Action Research*, and in particular John Eliot's foreword, which chronicles the rise of what he calls the teachers-as-researchers or action research movement and which credits Lawrence Stenhouse as the "formative influence" behind such movement.⁵ Stenhouse became

⁴The issues raised here are discussed further in Patricia Stock's forthcoming book *The Rhetoric and Poetics of Education*.

⁵Cochran-Smith and Lytle, in their discussion of the history of the teacher-research movement, note its roots in action research in the 1950s and 1960s. They mention in particular Lewin and Corey as two whose work "presented an implicit

a champion of teachers in schools as he directed a number of projects which celebrated the presence of teachers as contributors to the research community. He encouraged teachers to study curriculum issues in their own schools and to publish papers and speak at conferences about their findings. Stenhouse critiqued the control of educational research by outside researchers practicing what he termed the "psychostatistical paradigm"; he called instead for the establishment of a different kind of paradigm, that of action-oriented research. In his view, action research promoted the role of teachers as theory makers because of their intimate knowledge of the inner workings of the classroom, leading to teachers taking on new roles as the driving forces for change in the schools. He believed the relationship between teachers and researchers, then, had to change as well as the relationship between theory and practice. He believed that "teachers must inevitably be intimately involved in the research process. . . . [R]esearchers must justify themselves to practitioners, not practitioners to researchers" (Rud-dock and Hopkins 19). In addition, he saw the new role of research as that of "producing theory which can enrich action" (28), action which benefits both teachers and students. As Stenhouse says, "Action research in education rests upon the designing of procedures in schools which meet both action criteria and research criteria, that is, experiments which can be justified both on the grounds of what they teach teachers and researchers and on the grounds of what they teach pupils" (29).

As I read about Stenhouse, I turned with growing enthusiasm to his counterparts in the United States: Goswami and Berthoff, Shaughnessy and Heath, Paley and Atwell. I learned about the networks of teacher-researchers that had arisen in this country: the National Writing Project, the Bread Loaf School of English, Marion Mohr's program for teacher-researchers at George Mason University, and, more recently, Janet Miller's work with teachers in the New York area. I was particularly struck by Goswami's survey of teacher-research which led her to notice certain common characteristics among those teachers who conduct research in their own classrooms:

critique of the usefulness of basic research for social change," although they acknowledge Stenhouse as one of the most "influential" interpreters of action research (4-5).

1. Their teaching is transformed in important ways: they become theorists, articulating their intentions, testing their assumptions, and finding connections with practice.
2. Their perceptions of themselves as writers and teachers are transformed. They step up their use of resources; they form networks; and professionally they become more active.
3. They become rich resources who can provide the profession with information it simply doesn't have. They can observe closely, over long periods of time, with special insights and knowledge . . .
4. They become critical, responsive readers and users of current research, less apt to accept uncritically others' theories, less vulnerable to fads, and more authoritative in their assessment of curricula, methods, and materials.
5. They can study writing and learning and report their findings without spending large sums of money (although they must have support and recognition) . . .
6. They collaborate with their students to answer questions important to both, drawing on community resources in new and unexpected ways . . . (Goswami and Stillman, preface)

I was sold. As I read these articles and articles by other authors, I began to think carefully about how I, too, might become a teacher-researcher. Ann Berthoff, for example, taught me to see the value in pronouncing “ ‘research’ the way the southerners do: REsearch,”; she taught me the value of rejecting ERIC as the primary source of understanding my students and to look instead in a serious manner at the information I had gathered from the students themselves. She writes, “REsearch, like REcognition, is a REflexive act. It means looking—and looking again. This new kind of REsearch would not mean going out after new ‘data’ but rather REconsidering what is at hand” (Goswami and Stillman 30).

Lucy Calkins taught me the difficulty but importance of trying to make the familiarity of the classroom unfamiliar in order that I might see what was occurring before my eyes. She recalls her first occasion as a researcher in a classroom, an incident which became quite real for me during my first few attempts at making the familiar unfamiliar:

On my second day as a researcher, Don Graves joined me in Pat Howard's third-grade classroom. The children weren't writing, but Graves suggested we stay. I paced up and down the rows. The kids were all copying things out of their math books. I anxiously

waited for someone to *do something* so I could gather some data. But no, they just kept on copying out of those math books. I went to the back of the room and leaned against the radiator to wait for some data to appear. Nothing. Finally I signaled to Graves, who'd been scurrying about, and we left.

Before I could let out a quiet groan, Graves burst out with, "What a gold mine! Wasn't it amazing? How'd you suppose that one kid up front could write with a two-inch pencil? And that guy with the golf ball eraser on the end of his pen. Zowie." In his enthusiasm, Graves didn't notice my silence. . . .

I had learned a big lesson. The task of case-study research is to make the familiar unfamiliar. (9–10)

Vivian Paley taught me to try to see the world through the eyes of my students, to accept and explore their logic, their "magical thinking," as a key to understanding their perceptions of the classroom. She tells us about the "remarkable point of view" to which children can expose us—if we care enough to listen and watch:

WALLY: People don't feel the same as grown-ups.

TEACHER: Do you mean "Children don't"?

WALLY: Because grown-ups don't remember when they were little. They're already an old person. Only if you have a picture of you doing that. Then you could remember.

EDDIE: But not thinking.

WALLY: You never can take a picture of thinking. Of course not.
(4)

Reflecting on this exchange, Paley writes:

You can, however, write a book about thinking—by recording the conversations, stories, and playacting that take place as events and problems are encountered. A wide variety of thinking emerges, as morality, science, and society share the stage with fantasy. If magical thinking seems most conspicuous, it is because it is the common footpath from which new trails are explored. I have learned not to resist this magic but to seek it out as a legitimate part of "real" school. (4)

Nancie Atwell taught me to have the courage to allow what I learned from this kind of research to be a catalyst for change in my classroom. She recounts her first exposure, and first resistance, to some ideas shared with her by another teacher-researcher, Susan Sowers:

I kept Susan at our school much later that day than she intended to stay, explaining the reasons her findings couldn't possibly apply to me and my students. All that week I continued to explain, to anyone who would listen, how Sowers advocated topic anarchy. But on my free periods and in the evening, I read and reread the manuscripts she'd shared. And I saw through my defenses to the truth: I didn't know how to share responsibility with my students, and I wasn't too sure I wanted to. . . .

What I did, finally, was to put the question to my students: "Children in an elementary school in New Hampshire are choosing their own topics for writing. Could you do this? Would you like to?" Resoundingly, they said yes, and the underground curriculum surfaced. (*In The Middle* 179–180)

Through these and other works, I learned to appreciate teachers' depictions and analyses of their classrooms as well as the variety of genres in which teachers shared the results of their research with others. From Paley's not-so-simple telling of stories to Calkins' analytical case-study research, to Atwell's curriculum design, teachers inscribed their "study of cases," as Stenhouse suggested they might. In their various and accumulating presentations, these teacher-researchers helped me to form the beginnings of an argument: that context-based studies could provide a vision of classrooms and students that teachers to this point had been unable to glean from studies conducted by professional researchers in classrooms. Research conducted by teachers, I discovered, might lead quickly to soundly reasoned changes in pedagogy; teachers can empower themselves intellectually and politically as they present their research in the academic community. Instead of the separatist research scenario I had been trained to embrace, I began to imagine my classroom as a place where theory and practice might become one, where teachers might become researchers and researchers might become teachers to the benefit of them both and, more importantly, to the the benefit of students.

LEARNING NEW WAYS: THE WINKS UPON WINKS UPON WINKS OF ETHNOGRAPHY

When I began graduate school in English and Education, I assumed that I would be reading into fields traditionally associated with that subject area: composition studies, critical theory, reading

development, and literary theory, for example. Because of my growing interest in teacher-research and through the encouragement of my professors, I began to read in areas that at first seemed strange to me: philosophy, anthropology, and feminist studies, among others. I was surprised to find strong connections between the methodologies which informed these fields of study and teacher-research. And so, like many learning teacher-researchers, I became intrigued by the variety of disciplines that were influencing its development as a research movement. Like other teachers interested in doing context-based research, I began to read into interpretive anthropology and to explore ethnographic research methods because such methods emphasize the value of local knowledge and thick description, of coming to understand an event from the point of view of the participants in that event. I did so mindful of Mohr and Maclean's caution about the differences that exist between the methodology of ethnography and that employed by teacher-researchers:

Ethnographers are new to and separate from the situations they enter. For them distance is the starting point. . . . Teacher-researchers deal with the same participant-observer role tension, but for them the starting point is one of participation, not observation—immersion, not distance. (55)

My caution attracted me to the kind of ethnography practiced by one of anthropology's leading—if controversial—spokesmen, Clifford Geertz, who offered me much in the way of understanding how to do contextual study.

I learned that cultural anthropologists like Geertz believe that the best means of learning about a particular culture is through intimate involvement in that culture, by listening to the people who make up a particular community and by trying to represent their voices in as complete a fashion as possible, always highlighting the complicated contextual nature of such local knowledge. Traditionally, these anthropologists rely on the researcher becoming a participant-observer in a particular world and learning—somehow—to balance the attempt to establish a close relationship with those one is observing in order to truly understand the world from their point of view, with the attempt to retain enough distance from those informants in order to comment on them as others. Traditionally, then, ethnographic research becomes a con-

stant ping-pong game of getting close and stepping back, getting close and stepping back, as one carefully tries to maintain that balance. Geertz talks of this distinction in terms of experience-near and experience-distant concepts:

An experience-near concept is, roughly, one that someone—a patient, a subject, in our case an informant—might himself naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or his fellows see, feel, think, imagine, and so on, and which he would readily understand when similarly applied by others. An experience-distant concept is one that specialists of one sort or another—an analyst, an experimenter, an ethnographer, even a priest or an ideologist—employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims. (*Local Knowledge* 57)

Geertz believes in the blending of the two roles, but he stresses that in order to come to “see things from the native’s point of view,” one needs to consider the implication of each role. He continues:

Confinement to experience-near concepts leaves an ethnographer awash in immediacies, as well as entangled in vernacular. Confinement to experience-distant ones leaves him stranded in abstractions and smothered in jargon. . . . To grasp concepts that, for another people, are experience-near, and to do so well enough to place them in illuminating connection with experience-distant concepts theorists have fashioned to capture the general features of social life, is clearly a task at least as delicate, if not a bit less magical, as putting oneself into someone else’s skin. The trick is not to get yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants. . . . The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to. (*Local Knowledge* 57–58)

This figuring out “what the devil they think they are up to” becomes essentially the ethnographer’s task.

In order to perform this task, Geertz rejects the usual description of ethnography as merely methodology. Instead he refers to this process of “doing ethnography” as a kind of “intellectual effort . . . an elaborate adventure” (*Works and Lives* 6), a way of inscribing social discourse—that is, reading the situation and then writing down events in human lives as they occur. “Doing ethnography is like trying to read . . . a manuscript,” he believes, “foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherences, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior” (*Interpretation of Cultures* 10). Ethnography in this