From 1987-2008, the Teacher Research program supported teachers in all subject areas as they examined how their students learn. The program considered various approaches to classroom inquiry that focused on the teachers’ observations and reflections. Throughout the year, teachers developed a research question to pursue, collected and analyzed student work related to their research question, and wrote a report of their studies. The Teacher Research Program provided opportunities for teachers to reflect on their teaching, to look at how their students learn, and to share their discoveries with other teachers. To support teachers who continue to do teacher research on their own, REEd is making the Facilitator’s Handbook available online.

**General Information & Publication Guidelines**  
Teacher Research Is
Essential Elements & Expectations of the Research Report  
Program Expectations & Teacher Research: An Analytic Framework  
Guidelines for Conducting & Publishing Teacher Research  
Sample Letter to Parents & Photo Release Form

**Facilitating a Group**  
Calendar—Suggested Timeline & Possible Topics  
Sample Recruitment flyers  
Typical Agenda Items  
Ice Breakers  
Discussion Strategies  
“Humor, Shared Responsibility, and Community Developing a Cohesive Teacher Research Group”  
Protocol for Setting Norms for a Teacher Research Group

**Setting Up Writing Groups**  
“The Teacher Research Group as Writing Group:  
A Reflection on a Process”  
Writer's Workshop Procedures  
Questioning Strategies for Writing Groups  
Suggestions for Successful Writing Groups  
Tips for Writing Groups
What is Teacher Research? (some thoughts)

In August 1998 a group of facilitators generated the following descriptors.

**Teacher Research is...**
- a personal and professional process of classroom-teacher inquiry driven by the interests, questions and issues of the teacher doing the research
- documentation of the evolution of teaching approaches, philosophies and goals facilitated within a group of teachers
- a place for teachers to participate in educational and academic freedom
- constructing a way to view one’s own teaching situation and the influence the situation has on others
- driven by a deep dedication to improving the success and experiences of students and/or teachers in schools
- a way to learn more about student experiences in school
- a way for teachers to track their own learning about teaching
- a community of professional educators exploring, investigation, dialoguing and writing about their own research together.

A year later, in August, 1999 a group of teacher research facilitators generated the following descriptors after reading a chapter in Marilyn Cochran-Smith & Susan L. Lytle (1993), *Learning From Teacher Research: A Working Typology*. These descriptors complement those generated the previous year.

**Teacher Research is...**
- systematic, intentional inquiry
- conducted by teachers about their own school or classroom work
- inner directed
- represented in various forms
- to learn deliberately
- conducted by a stakeholder and you are included
- able to make visible the internal classroom that is not typically represented
- a complement to “traditional” educational research
- fundamentally social and constructive
- individual and collaborative
- communicating, making it public
- observations, experiences, and perspectives
- current, timely, or timeless
- making sense of what is happening in the classroom/school, meaning making

**Teacher Research is NOT...**
- necessarily new research
- a mismatched collection of information
- just venting about administration/parents/colleagues
ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS AND EXPECTATIONS OF THE RESEARCH REPORT

“What should the paper include?”

“What does it need to look like?”

“Will I get any feedback?”

and, of course, “How long does it have to be?”

CRESS Teacher Research Facilitators have long been answering questions like these posed by teachers in their research groups. After numerous discussions about how to most effectively inform teachers in their groups about the nature of the “final product,” during the summer of 2000 the CRESS Teacher Research Facilitators generated a set of essential elements for the work Teacher Researchers turn in at the end of the year. These discussions raised several important issues: (1) the “product” can’t stifle the process—the product should illuminate the process; (2) organizing the “final product” is integral to the research process itself; and (3) the program should encourage alternative forms and formats and provide guidance consistent with our working definition of Teacher Research.

The following elements should characterize any teacher research work turned in at the end of the year and are intended to offer guidance while providing opportunities for experimentation with alternative and creative formats. The contents of this Handbook were organized to assist facilitators in supporting work that reflects these elements.

Essential Elements of CRESS Teacher Research Reports

- a clearly framed research question or issue and an explanation of how you came to that question or issue
- a clear description of the context for the research: include where, when, who
- a clear description of the research process/methods, offering evidence that the process took place
- data (information you collected, used, organized, and analyzed)
- details, specifics, “thick description”
- a sense of wonder about student and teacher learning
- a format, organization, or shape that is appropriate to your content
- a sense of voice (teacher’s and students’)

A Note on REVISION of Teacher Research Studies

CRESS encourages teacher researchers to take the opportunity to go back over their finished work and to refine it with the possible goal of presentation or publication.

Revision is a highly individual process that grows naturally out of the strengths and weaknesses of each paper. However, it often involves:

1) making the organization more apparent and clear
2) adding more detail and including more specific examples/data
3) deepening analysis
4) modulating voice to suit the target audience
5) working on the writing itself for correctness and “flow”
CRESS Teacher Research Program Expectations
Participation as a Writer

Writing is a regular feature of the teacher research group activities. All participants, whether or not they are enrolled in the seminar for University Extension credits, are expected to write as part of their research process. At each teacher research meeting facilitators will provide SSW (Silent Sustained Writing) time. Facilitators will provide a minimum of 15 minutes of SSW at every meeting. They will organize writing prompts and activities for their groups depending on their needs. Additionally three writing assignments called WARPds (Writing About Research Progress) will be turned in during the year.

**WARP #1 Due December**
Participants will turn in writing about (1) the issue/research question they are exploring this year and (2) their research setting.

**WARP #2 Due February**
Participants will turn in writing about (1) the information they are collecting (data) and (2) connections, insights, new questions, and theory building (preliminary analysis).

**WARP #3 Due June**
Participants will turn in their research reports. For more specific information see discussion of “Essential Elements of the Research Report. Most studies for publication require adding more detail. It is very important to SAVE YOUR DATA and any relevant permission forms.

Guidelines for Conducting and Publishing Teacher Research
CRESS Center
School of Education, University of California, Davis

Conducting teacher research studies that evaluate curriculum, question current practice or consider alternative approaches to instruction are all legitimate extensions of a teacher's professional obligations. As professionals who are interested in understanding more about classroom instruction and student learning, teachers regularly pose questions, collect data, analyze data, and make informed decisions. As teacher researchers, teachers approach these activities in a systematic way and often become learners in their own classrooms. By sharing what they learn with the broader educational community, teachers are contributing to a knowledge base from which others might draw.

When conducting classroom research, teachers must be alert to issues regarding student privacy and parental rights. The need to inform and/or seek the permission of students, teachers, and school administrators depends upon the nature of the study and school/university policies. In some cases teachers might want to involve students as co-investigators, thus modeling the inquiry process and encouraging students to be thoughtful and reflective about their own learning. Other times a teacher might want simply to inform parents about the nature of the investigations. However, if the nature of an investigation extends beyond the boundaries of a teacher’s professional role or includes methods that fall outside the teaching routine normally followed, then the teacher must secure permission from students, parents, and administrators. Also, teachers must follow all policies set by local school districts and the university.

The subjects (students and colleagues) of classroom investigations always deserve respect. They have a right to privacy, not only when they are the subjects of a teacher’s private discussions with colleagues, but especially when teachers choose to make the results of investigations public. Teachers can help to ensure the privacy of students and colleagues by changing their names and other identifying characteristics. It is also important to exercise caution when publishing studies that contain sensitive material or personal information about students or schools. It is not advisable to publish a study that berates students, parents, other teachers and colleagues, or administrators.

Peer review of research studies can help maintain quality and professionalism. Teacher researchers should seek the advice and comment of colleagues at all stages of their research, and in particular, when writing the results. Facilitators are also available to review research results. Once a draft report is finished, a teacher researcher might ask, “Would I feel comfortable having the subject(s) of my paper read it?” If the answer is “no,” the teacher may wish to discuss the reasons with members of her or his teacher research group and come to a resolution about the areas under question, before publishing.
SAMPLE LETTER TO PARENTS

Dear Parents,

I am writing you to inform you of some special activities we will be doing in our classroom this year. This year as I teach my classes I will be considering how I can learn more about the teaching and learning process. One way of doing this is to pose some questions about the nature of teaching and learning that I might be able to answer during the course of the year by collecting information about student progress, classroom climate, curricular materials and my own perceptions. This information might be contained in samples of student work, in excerpts from my teaching journal, or in records of my observations of classroom interactions. At times I may talk to students about their perceptions of their own learning and of my instruction. My intent is to learn more about my teaching so that I can make more informed choices about how I teach. None of these activities will interfere with my normal teaching responsibilities.

I will also be meeting with some other teachers on a regular basis to review and discuss what I am learning. By the end of the year I plan to prepare a paper, which reports my findings. If in the course of my observations and investigations I find that I want to focus on an individual student’s learning, or to conduct formal interviews, or to collect information that would not be a regular part of my teaching activities, I will ask for your permission in advance. In all cases I will not reveal the identities of individual students.

If you have any questions about these activities, please call me.

Sincerely,

Photo Release Form

Name (please print) ____________________________________________

Address __________________________ City ______________________

Zip Code ________________ Phone ( ) _________________________

I give authorization and consent for University to use my name, photograph(s), video camera recordings, for educational and promotional purposes. I understand that these items may be distributed to individuals, groups, and the news media and published in, but not limited to, advertisements, news releases and newsletters, slide shows, video presentations and the World Wide Web.

_________________________________ ________________________ 
Signature of Minor Signature of Parent or Guardian Date
Facilitating a Group

Calendar—Suggested Timeline & Possible Topics
Sample Recruitment flyers
Typical Agenda Items
Ice Breakers
Discussion Strategies
“Humor, Shared Responsibility, and Community Developing a Cohesive Teacher Research Group”
Protocol for Setting Norms for a Teacher Research Group
The table below includes suggestions for 16 Teacher Research meetings, as well as conferences, facilitator meetings and important deadlines. The meetings are generally separated into time to write, reflect and share, time to discuss a chapter from the reading materials, and time to work on teachers' research.

**A Suggested Timeline and Possible Topics/Articles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session and Date</th>
<th>Topics and Deadlines</th>
<th>Readings from: Teacher Researchers at Work</th>
<th>Readings from: The Art of Classroom Inquiry</th>
<th>TR Papers: Ex for Group Discussion</th>
<th>Writing Prompts</th>
<th>Snack</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| SESSION 1 Sept   | • Introducing ourselves  
• Discuss definitions of teacher research  
• Informational: dates, credit  
• Questions | • Beginning: What do you need? (p.1)  
• What Happens When You Teach and Conduct Research at the Same Time? (p.106) | Selections from Windows on Our Classrooms, Vol. 8 | | | |
| SESSION 2 Sept   | • Orientation  
• Icebreakers  
• Nitty gritty details  
• Read, write and discuss 10 wonderings about the classroom | • Choice and the Research Question: What do you want to know? (p.2)  

**October 22: Facilitator Meeting, 4:30-7:30 p.m., UC Davis. Due date for UNEX sign up sheets; option to turn in WARP #1**

| SESSION 3 October | How can we keep a record of what is happening?  
• Journaling, tape, photography, video, surveys, drawings, papers, models…  
• CRESS Guidelines  
• Share journal entries  
• Write/reflect and share | • The Research Log: How do you record what you see and think? (p.12)  
| SESSION 4 October | How can we collect data?  
• Discuss Chapter 2: “Data Collection”  
• Write/reflect and share  
• Discuss article | • Timing: How does the research look during a school year? (p.25)  
• When Do You Find Time To Do Teacher Research? (p.133)  
• What and when do you read in the research process? (p.77) | Read Chapter 3: “Research Design” | | | |

**NOVEMBER 6: Supper Seminar, 4:30-7:30, Rec Pool Lodge, UC Davis**

| SESSION 5 Nov | What do we think our research questions will be?  
• Research question(s) due, rough draft  
• Discuss Chapter 3: “Research Design”  
• Write/reflect and share  
• Discuss article | • Observation and Reflection: What do you see? What do you think about what you see? (p.27)  
• Of What Use is Teacher Research? (p.156) | Read Chapter 4: “Data Analysis” | | | |

**DECEMBER 8: Facilitator Meeting, 4:30-7:30 p.m., UC Davis. Due date for group calendars; due date WARP #1**

**DECEMBER 15: Deadline for Voices presenter proposals**

| SESSION 6 Dec | How can we analyze our data?  
• Discuss Chapter 4: “Data Analysis”  
• Write/reflect and share  
• Discuss article | Data Collection: How can you find out what you want to know? (p.36) | Read Chapter 5: “Literature Review” and Chapter 6: “Writing Research” | | | |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SESSION</th>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>TOPIC</th>
<th>NOTES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7 January</td>
<td>January</td>
<td>How do we begin to write up our papers?</td>
<td>Data Analysis: What are you finding out? What does it mean? (p. 56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 January</td>
<td>January</td>
<td>Write/reflect and share</td>
<td>Continue with Data Collection and Analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 9 February | February  | 1st rough draft due, Discuss Chapter 7, Write/reflect and share, Discuss article and/or our own work | • How do you go public with your research? (p. 83)  
• How Do You Explain Teacher Research to Others? (p. 145) |
| 10 February | February | Write/reflect and share, Discuss article and/or our own work       | Variety and Quality (p. 165) |
| 11 March | March      | Write/reflect and share, Discuss article and/or our own work       | Reading samples Teacher Research Studies |
| 12 April | April      | 2nd rough draft due, Write/reflect and share, Discuss article and/or our own work | Reading samples Teacher Research Studies |
| 13 April | April      | Write/reflect and share, Discuss article and/or our own work       | Reading samples Teacher Research Studies |
| 14 May   | May        | Write/reflect and share, Discuss article and/or our own work       |                             |
| 15 May   | May        | 3rd draft due, Write/reflect and share, Discuss article and/or our own work |                             |
| 16 May   | May        | Final Draft due, Write/reflect and share                             |                             |

**JUNE 30:** Teacher Research papers, abstracts, and copyrights due: June 30, 2004

CONTRIBUTED BY SANDY CREPPS
The Reflective Practitioner

As professional learners, we need time to reflect on our practice and share reflections among a group of peers. We need to examine issues that we face daily in our classrooms. We need to be a little more deliberate about examining what, how and why we make the constant decisions we make in our learning environments. We need to share our challenges and discoveries with a small group of trustworthy peers.

These needs can be met by meeting every two weeks for a few hours, right after school in a comfortable setting with an open atmosphere and appropriate refreshments. We can begin by keeping field notes of our classroom, recording observations, and collecting samples of student work and “kid watching.” We can each take time to write reflectively in a journal about what we see in our rooms. When we meet we can talk about what we’re observing and what we’ve thought about it.

As the year progresses, we can begin to look for a question or investigation that can guide our continued observations and reflections. We can also read articles or books together and analyze their relevance to our learning.

Such a group of Teacher Researchers works best when the size is five to ten dedicated members who are committed to meeting regularly. A mix of teachers from several sites adds opportunities for broader perspectives on and deeper insights into our issues.

With regular attendance and writing of a short paper, these meetings can also qualify for 4.5 quarter units through the CRESS Center at UC Davis.

Every teacher I know, who has participated in this activity, has felt that it is the single, most powerful, professional development activity they have ever done. Instead of being seen as “another time commitment,” it is relished as a time for renewal and regeneration.

Let’s try meeting Monday, September 13 at 3:00, in Room 18 at xx School, to see who’s interested and to set subsequent meeting times and places. Let me know if you want to come, but can’t make it. Otherwise, keep it to yourself.

Several of us did this last year, and I’m ready to get started again this year. Let me know if you want to do it (again?), or you can just come to the first meeting to find out more.

[name of teacher leader]
TYPICAL AGENDA ITEMS
for a Teacher Research Meeting

1. Refreshments!
2. Decompression Time (casual conversation, throw things...)
3. “Ice Breaker” Activity (get acquainted)
4. Outside Readings (discussions)
5. Journal Entries Reading (discussions)
6. Journal Writing (reflective)
7. Sharing Research Progress (data analysis, question development)
8. Break (including more refreshments!)
9. Research Paper (reading, discussing, editing, writing)
10. Logistics/Reminders (meeting dates and locations, upcoming events, refreshment sign-ups, deadlines)
11. Other

CONTRIBUTED BY TROY BURKE
Ice Breakers

**Interview Intro**
Two people get to know each other. Each introduces the other person to the whole group (or to a smaller subset of the whole group).

**Collaborative Circles**
Divide a circle so that the number of sections equals the number of people in the group. Put each person’s name by a section of the circle. One at a time, each person puts something special about him or herself in their section. No one else can have that feature. After each person has filled in one special item, then the group must find a common item. That statement goes in the center of the circle. Repeat this as often as you want.

**True False**
On index cards write six statements about yourself—four true and two false. See if people in your group can figure out which are true and which are false. You can use fewer statements for small groups.

**The following activities are from the book Sharing Your Good Ideas, by Peggy A. Sharp, Heinemann, 1993, ISBN # 0-435-08783-5.**

**Participant Scavenger Hunt**
Give participants a list of characteristics. Their task is to find others in the group for whom the various statements are true. You might, for example, ask them to find an only child, a parent of more than three children, someone who has traveled to more than three foreign countries, etc.

**What’s in the Purse or Wallet**
Before you begin, ask volunteers to go through the contents of their purses or wallets to find five or ten items they are willing to show to other people. Put the materials into envelopes with some type of owner identification. When the workshop begins, give one of the envelopes to each small group of participants. The groups examine the contents and draw conclusions about the owner of the materials regarding his or her personality, physical features, activities, and special characteristics. Have groups share and discuss their conclusions. The owner then retrieves the materials and has an opportunity to respond to the conclusions drawn.

**Symbolically Speaking**
Ask the teachers to draw symbols for their lives on their name tags. Have them explain their symbols to others in the group.

**Advertise Yourself**
Have participants write a short ad about themselves, featuring some unique trait or a skill of which they are especially proud. Collect and redistribute these ads and let participants identify each ad writer. A similar strategy could be used with newspaper headlines.

**I Am Like A...**
Have available an interesting collection of props such as an eggbeater, a book, a timer, and a pillow. Participants name one of the props and say why they are like that prop. You can also use a collection of books.

**People Bingo**
In a standard bingo card format, write 25 characteristics, one for each square, that participants are to find among the other teachers in the workshop. It’s best to have a combination of professional and personal attributes on the card to invite socializing. When participants find someone with the attribute mentioned in the square, that person signs the card. Give participants a limited amount of time (say, ten minutes) to achieve bingo. The only rule is that no one can sign the same card for more than one attribute.

See *Get It Together!* This book has plenty of good icebreaker ideas.

CONTRIBUTED BY ED REED
Discussion Strategies for Teacher Research Groups

Fortune Cookie
Start with five or six good questions written on separate slips of paper and placed in an envelope. The first person chooses a slip, reads the questions, and responds to it appropriately. After making one statement, the next person in the group makes one statement, and so on. Then begin with another slip, and continue the process. Prepare posters with each prompt so that your participants can write their best responses on each poster. You can then use these posters at subsequent meetings as needed.

Carousel
Hang a series of posters on the walls. Place pens near them. Each poster should have a good question or issue at the top. Ask the participants to go to the posters in groups and write as many thoughts as they can on the poster. Then instruct them to rotate to the next poster, and so on until you are all done. Give them about three minutes for the first round, two for the second, and one each for subsequent posters.

Whiparound
The facilitator gives a prompt (a topic or question) and the participants make brief comments about the prompt. Go in order around your circle or table and ask everyone to say something. It is okay for people to pass. An example of a prompt is “What are you going to do this week in order to jumpstart your teacher research?”

Support Dyads
Two people take turns giving each other attention for a set period of time. Here are some guidelines.
1) Each person alternates taking equal time to talk while the other provides attentive and thoughtful listening.
2) The listener does not analyze, give advice, or break in with his or her story.
3) Confidentiality is respected.
4) The talker does not use the support dyad to criticize or complain about the listener.

Reflective Writing
Give your group a different prompt (question) each meeting, give them time to write (15 minutes or so, depending upon the activity) and then have them discuss the question.

Think Pair Share
Give your participants a good prompt, and then direct them to write silently for several minutes. Once they have finished, let them form pairs and share what they’ve written. After several minutes of sharing, allow each pair to share some of their responses with the entire group.

Pairs Check
For this activity your participants need to work in pairs. Give each pair two similar tasks. Model the task for them. Then one member of the pair does the task and shows it to the other member. If the second member agrees, then they go on. The second member then does the second task and shares it with the first member. The first member checks the work and either agrees or disagrees.

Teammates Consult
Give the group a prompt of some sort, and then have your participants discuss the prompt in pairs. Allow them time to discuss and debate, and then pull the group back together for a whole group discussion. This whole group discussion may be very short if the pairs worked well together.

Reciprocal Teaching
Very similar to pairs check, except that the members of the pair must teach each other a specific task. The member not teaching needs to ask appropriate questions.

CONTRIBUTED BY ED REED
Humor, Shared Responsibility, and Community: Developing a Cohesive Teacher Research Group

Troy Burke
Armijo High School
Fairfield-Suisun Unified, Fairfield, California

Article from Windows On Our Classrooms, Volume 8, published by the CRESS Center, School of Education, University of California, Davis, 2000

We’re all in a large meeting room during a quiet reading and writing portion of the fall Teacher Research Supper Seminar sponsored by the CRESS Center at the University of California, Davis. The quiet is momentarily broken when Roxanne sneezes and apologetically whispers, “excuse me.” Gunther looks up abruptly from his reading and retorts with an admonishing “shhh!” They both chuckle and go back to their quiet exercise.

My journal is filled with accounts of good-natured and humorous interactions within our merry band of teacher researchers from Armijo High School in Fairfield, California. Last school year, our group consisted of nine teachers, four returning from last year’s group and five new crew members. I considered myself fortunate to be the facilitator of co-researchers who were deeply dedicated to the teaching profession and yet had the knack of not taking themselves and their jobs too seriously.

I originally became interested in teacher research over a decade ago when my wife, Stacy, a high school English teacher, and I joined a group sponsored by the Center for Cooperative Research and Extension Services for Schools (CRESS) and facilitated by Jim Hahn. Jim, a former colleague from Armijo, had been hired by the University of California, Davis, to work with a regional Writing Project, which spawned the CRESS teacher research community. Having just finished my masters degree project in cooperative learning, I was intrigued by the idea of field testing the theories that I had studied in depth; I hoped to learn for myself the effectiveness of this pedagogical theory as I observed and recorded my own students’ behaviors during cooperative activities. My wife and I both found our ideas about our classrooms were valued and validated as we voiced them in this fellowship of teacher researchers. We were quickly sold on the value of this approach to the teaching profession. Over the past decade, Stacy and I have been research participants, facilitators, and coordinators for our respective school districts, the CRESS Center, Area 3 History and Cultures Project, Bay Region IV Consortium, and St. Mary’s College.

The past three years as teacher research facilitator at Armijo High were some of the most rewarding for me within the field of teacher research. Based upon personal observations, feedback from other researcher leaders, group participation in a variety of research activities, and the written research produced, it appeared that our group had evolved into a dynamic and effective community of researchers.

Wanting to document observations, reflections, and personal interactions that shed light upon this critical process, I felt it was necessary to make my colleagues the object of my analysis. For the focus question for my own research I chose: How do nine educators with different backgrounds, personalities, teaching experiences and subject areas, transform themselves into an enjoyable, cohesive teacher research group? To this end, I recorded my observations during our teacher research meetings at Armijo, supper seminars at the University of California, Davis, the annual “Voices from the Classroom” Teacher Research Conference, and informal observations and reflections in a variety of settings.

Up to now the subjects of my own research, of the articles that I’d read, and of the seminars that I’d attended had been classroom students, so using fellow researchers and my role as facilitator as the focus of my research would be a totally new approach for me. The idea of charting “new waters” in teacher research both intrigued and intimidated me. The art and science of facilitating a teacher research group would be interesting to describe; however,
defining the essence of facilitating would likely prove an illusive challenge. I was plagued by
questions: how much of what I would be able to describe would be transferable or relevant to
other groups; how much would simply be the chemistry of the unique personalities in our
group? Nevertheless, I naively stepped into this arena, destined to make a number of personal
blunders in the process of learning about what makes a cohesive teacher research group but also
to discover new insights.

A Sense of Humor

Blunder number one: I initially failed to secure permission from my group to be the
objects of my research. Early in this school year at one of our meetings, when we took turns to
discuss possible focus questions, I shared my idea and received no objections. I therefore
assumed that it was okay with everyone that they would be my research subjects, but a comment
that Gunther made at the “Voices from the Classroom” Conference made me rethink my
assumption.

Attending one workshop, we were informed by the presenters that participants were
formally “observed” during the presentation, but we were not asked for our permission. Early
on in the workshop, Gunther borrowed my journal and wrote, “Where’s the cheese?” I read his
note, and at first I didn’t understand this “Guntherish” query. Then, it dawned on me that he
was upset that the researchers hadn’t bothered to secure our permission to be their “research
rats,” and I immediately made a connection between the format of this workshop and how I
was conducting research in our group. Later I shared my concern, and Gunther reassured me
that the need for “strangers to secure permission was more crucial than colleagues who worked
with each other on a continual basis.” I wasn’t sure if he was just trying to protect my feelings,
but I certainly had my doubts about the wisdom of my approach.

Shortly after the conference, I found it necessary to miss our group meeting due to a
family emergency. Wanting to deal with the possible conflict over my research head-on and to
involve the group in seeking a solution, I sent a memo to Vladimir, another member of our
group, to ask him to fill in for me as facilitator. Unknown to me, however, I was also opening
the door for my colleagues’ sense of humor to help develop group identity which lasted
throughout the rest of the school year. My memo to Vladimir read:

There is one more item of business I had planned to cover. Maybe it’s good that I’m not
there for it, so that the group can speak frankly. It is the issue that I spoke with you
about the other day (e.g. seeking permission from the group to be the focus of my
research paper). Have a group discussion to see if consensus can be reached on the
format that my paper should take from one of the following options:

1. Written in ‘general terms’ without specific mention of individual behaviors
   observed within our group.
2. Specific behaviors mentioned but names of researchers changed.
3. Specific behaviors mentioned and names not changed.
4. Other format?

I returned to campus the following day to find a memo from Vladimir in my mailbox:

The group discussed your research format last night and concluded that the second
option, that of specific behaviors with pseudonyms, would be in order. We have selected
pseudonyms, or “noms de research,” and challenge you to link the pseudonym with the
correct individual. This test will be worth 25% of your final grade.

The memo went on to list the pseudonyms with a blank line next to each on which I was
supposed to fill in the matching group members’ names; however I had no idea what
connections, if any, they were making between their real identities and the personas they had
created. My pleas for assistance in the “name maze” were greeted with mocking comments,
such as “Who do you think they are?” (Sam), or “This is really starting to bug you, isn’t it?”
(Guido). I suspected that they had great fun at my expense coming up with these names. Was this their good-natured way of getting back at me for not securing their permission earlier...?

Somehow, this one episode yielded two important answers to my research question.

First: a sense of humor is vital for group cohesion. This sense of humor was one of the main characteristics that helped our group bond in our meetings throughout the school year; comic relief helped keep the mood of our gatherings from getting too heavy. Many of my journal entries included humorous anecdotes:

Francine likes to use wacky terms such as “umpty-squat” or “fiddle-farting” when describing something from her journal.

I suddenly looked up at the table of our female researchers at the Supper Seminar and confidently announced the name “Lolita.” Lolita, figuring that I knew who she was, gave away her identity by turning bright red. Little did she know that I still had no idea whose pseudonym this was. This was one of my few successes in being able to “smoke-out” the identity of a mystery name!

I explained during one of our group meetings that we were to do some reflective writing. Everyone had just begun writing when Guido inquired, “So what do we do?” Gunther curtly responded, “Just be quiet and write something!” Everyone chuckled, including the chastised Guido, as we all got back to writing in our journals.

In fact, as I look back over my journal notes for the year, I notice that I have humorous entries involving every member. Despite all of our other differences, a sense of humor seems to be what we have most in common, and this spirit of wit and jesting has become our group’s trademark. Time and again, fellow members have mentioned how much they enjoyed our learning together and looked forward to every one of our meetings. The ability to laugh at myself has also helped me learn from my blunders as facilitator and to enjoy the good-natured camaraderie of my colleagues.

Second: group cohesion will develop on its own through the personal interactions of group members. Individual growth, group cohesion, and enjoyable learning for both the veterans and newcomers in our community of researchers had been my major goals, but these goals had scared me because I felt that I was individually responsible to make these transformations happen. However, this evolution had already been taking place without a “master plan” of facilitator strategies on my part. I didn’t have to create a cohesive group; they transformed themselves. My role as facilitator was simply to provide the opportunity for this transformation to take place and then to step aside and allow it to happen. I wrote a number of entries in my journal which reminded me, “Trust in the group to create its own growth, bonding, and learning!”

Toward Shared Responsibility

This feeling of being individually responsible as facilitator to achieve my group’s goals is at the heart of the mistakes I tend to replicate every year. At the beginning of every school year, I feel that I alone am the one responsible to create an environment that will encourage my group to have personal ownership in the teacher research process. I guess it’s only human to be somewhat anxious when you get together with a talented group of colleagues to begin a new journey of inquiry together. But what a twist of logic to think that it’s mainly up to one to produce a group! My journal included a number of reflection entries that revealed the pressure that I felt early in the year to “keep the ball moving” during our group meetings. Our meetings were a bit rigid, and I felt stressed. I reasoned to myself in the midst of my anxiety, “Yo dummy, how can one person create group dynamics?!”

I finally discovered the obvious while planning for an upcoming meeting’s agenda and reflecting on my approach to facilitation. I asked myself, “Was I trying to act more like a group leader than a facilitator of fellow educators?” At that point, I decided to be more of a “guide from the side” rather than a “sage on the stage.” My own anxiety became less pronounced.
when I began delegating responsibilities to other members, asking for volunteers to help lead the various activities of our meetings, and offering more opportunities for others to take on leadership roles during our meetings.

In an early attempt to encourage shared leadership of our gatherings, I asked members to bring their journals to our next meeting. When we gathered, I asked for a volunteer to read a journal entry. After a few awkward moments of silence, Gunther began reading about his classroom student observations. Shortly afterwards, Roxanne read about an observation she made about the impact on students of the campus “Tardy Tank,” a program conceived over a decade ago to help deal with the tremendous problem of habitual student tardiness. A hot topic, this led to quite a discussion! The over-achieving Vladimir had created a color graph which compared first and second period grades for the first semester and how first period had an “inverted bell-curve” wherein there were no “C” grades! Our discussions were lively because we were engaging in honest reflections of our own teaching experiences. Easily identifying with each other’s educational dilemmas and discoveries, we found that we had plenty of questions but no easy answers.

Other group discussion topics generated by fellow researchers included: Bertha’s plans to give extra points for students who corrected their own spelling errors on tests, Lolita’s evolution of her seating chart philosophy in her classroom (from student choice in circular seating arrangements to teacher selection in rows facing the front of the room), Francine’s humorous journal entries (that made Roxanne chuckle with that great laugh of hers), and Guido’s question, “Am I worrying too much to try and figure out ways to get students to buy-into their own education?” The discussion generated from our journal entries was free-flowing and energetic. I was not trying to control our discussions with preconceived questions as I had done previously. The group proved itself more than capable of guiding our discourse in directions that were both meaningful and necessary in our joint journey of discovery.

Later that same meeting, Lolita volunteered to facilitate an article reading discussion. After our group was given some time to quietly read a brief research article, Lolita inquired, “Does anyone see anything in the article that relates to your research?” Francine said that the article reinforced the idea that “it’s O.K. for your research to be a flop. You still can learn from the research process even if it’s not what you had hoped to accomplish.” This led to further group discussion about how it was important to not try to come up with easy answers to hard questions.

For an icebreaker activity at our following meeting, Bertha had us write about what we would do with our money if we hit the “Big Lotto.” After writing, we went around the group and shared our big-money plans, and Bertha beamed as she watched our group take her idea and run with it.

Immediately after our ice-breaker, Gunther led a brief discussion on another teacher research article, which included the suggestion to write a letter to a friend about your teacher research project as a way to help overcome writer’s block. Interestingly enough, Lolita and a few others found this point quite clever and helpful though I found it of little importance. I couldn’t imagine myself really writing such a letter, but the idea struck a chord with the group, and some were planning on giving this concept a try. This mixed response reemphasized the importance of encouraging different perspectives.

Watching each person successfully assume leadership, I felt like a burden was being lifted off of my shoulders; it is truly one of life’s treasured moments, to sit back and enjoy the art of shared inquiry unfolding!

Members had varying levels of personal comfort regarding the nature of the group responsibilities that they were willing to take on. Therefore, I felt that it was important to integrate a variety of types of group activities which members could facilitate. This not only created a comfortable environment, but it also kept our meetings dynamic and entertaining. The typical structure of our group meeting agendas offered a wide spectrum of participation levels.
The Sequence of Activities in a Typical Meeting

1. Dinner:
   
   Members take turns being our group’s gourmet. The proverb for teacher research communities, “feed them and they will come,” certainly holds true; however, I would add a facilitator’s corollary, “feed them well, and they will rarely miss a meeting!”

2. Socialize/Debrief/Unwind/Throw Things:
   
   Members have often voiced how teaching can often be such an isolating profession; day-in and day-out, instructors often close their classroom doors to contact with fellow adult professionals and totally submerge themselves into the constant demands of the student environment. We have discovered that this time to debrief and unwind provides a refuge from the intense stresses of our occupation; sharing frustrations, successes and humorous incidents has been critical for the social, psychological, and educational health (i.e. “sanity”) of our group and crucial to our success. After we get this “stuff” off of our chests and out of our systems, we are then ready to proceed with issues concerning classroom inquiry; indeed, research issues and questions frequently evolve from these valuable and yet informal discussions.

   We abide by two basic rules for our debriefing time to insure that this time and place is safe, comfortable, and productive:

   A. Confidentiality:
      
      What is shared within the group, stays within the group.

   B. Refrain from giving unsolicited advice:
      
      The issues we face as teachers are often multi-faceted and complex and do not have simple solutions. A few times I noticed some of our members offering advice when I perceived that we were simply unwinding or wanting to have a “sounding board” for our feelings. Believing that unless we specifically asked for advice, we simply needed to hear our own voice being articulated and have another help us clarify what we ourselves were trying to say, I expressed this concern, and the group agreed. However, this self-restraint is hard for teachers because we often see ourselves as wise classroom advice-givers.

3. Ice-Breaker Activities:
   
   These are usually more frequently used early in the school year when new and veteran group members are just beginning to become acquainted or reacquainted with each other. One ice-breaker technique that I employed in one of our fall meetings was a game of “true or false,” a simple, yet effective activity I had learned from a teacher research facilitators summer institute. After members wrote two things about themselves that were true and two that were false, then went around the group to read our list, as the group tried to guess which things were true or false. We had a great time guessing and laughing at what we discovered:

   Vladimir had the dubious distinction of being a pilot responsible for crashing an expensive helicopter and walking away from the accident unscathed. (We surmised that these events were all in preparation for his teaching career at Armijo High School!)

   When she lived on the east coast, Sam got stuck in a revolving door and couldn’t get outside or inside of a busy downtown building. She was destined to temporarily see the world through rotating glass panels. (We wondered if memories of that traumatic incident resurface today when she sees students rotate in and out of her classes over and over again?)

   Ice-breaker activities seemed to become less important as the group found its social/professional comfort zone. In fact, on one occasion I offered a writing prompt: “What suggestions do you have for making our group meetings even more effective and meaningful?” One group member responded, “I think we need to talk and do some of these (writing activities) in our meetings, instead of ice-breakers... I think we know ‘us,’ O.K.? I think we can build rapport by working on our papers and helping each other ask questions about our topics.” I guess that this member felt that our group had “thawed-out” a long time ago!

4. Writing Exercise:
   
   I usually select a prompt that relates to that same day’s experiences in the classroom or how their teacher research project is progressing. Sometimes we share our teacher research “work in progress” in order to gain insight from other members on some of our papers’ potential strengths and weaknesses. After silently reading each other’s work and writing brief comments about each, we circulate the papers around the group, so that everyone gets a chance to gather input from the variety of teacher perspectives represented. Those who do not feel like submitting their papers to be read may choose to use that time to quietly work on their own papers. It is rare that anyone chooses not to share their unfinished work; however, providing the opportunity for anyone who is not in the sharing mood to “pass” makes this time less intimidating and more productive.
5. **Journal Reading:**

Journals are our primary tool for data gathering. I suggested that fellow researchers keep their journal on their classroom desks or lecterns. When a student behavior is observed or an idea about a research topic hits in the middle of class, it only takes a moment to write a couple of brief notes. Journal entries may then be reread and expanded upon later between classes or at the end of the school day. A perfect opportunity for teachers to write in their journals is when they assign journal or other writing activities in class; not only do educators get a great opportunity to add observations and reflections into their journals during these class writings, but they also model an interest in writing for their students. It is a shared expectation in our group that all members bring their journals to every meeting. Sometimes our readings are oral and lead to group discussion; sometimes we read silently and write additional reflections about our entries into our own journals.

6. **Reading/Discussing Teacher Research Articles:**

Most of the articles we have read are from CRESS publications such as *Windows On Our Classrooms* or texts which focus upon teacher research. Through these articles, we have joined fellow researchers from various grade levels and subject areas, on their journeys of inquiry into their own classrooms. I have heard so many teachers over the years express how comforting it is to know that they are not alone in their experiences, victories, and frustrations.

7. **Announcements/Room Clean-up/“Snarf-down” Remaining Dinner Delicacies!**

No explanation needed here; it’s just how we always finish our meetings.

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**A Larger Sense of Community**

In my struggle to let go of feeling individually responsible for group dynamics, I know that being one part of a larger teacher research community is the most powerful resource that I can access.

A key element of our group’s effectiveness has been a shared expectation of the faithful attendance and participation of all its members. At the beginning of each school year, I explain the required number of meeting hours needed to earn credits from the University of California, Davis; that way it is the university’s expectations and the members’ own sense of professionalism and commitment to our research community which become the motivating forces to attend and to be involved. I e-mail a reminder to every member a day or two before each meeting. We also lure in one another with “scrumptious vittles” and create a lively learning environment where everyone wants to be there for every meeting. It is rare indeed, if anyone ever misses a meeting; however, it’s no big deal if someone does. We trust that it was for an important reason and that our fellow researcher would inform us ahead of time. I also have the assurance that if I have to miss a meeting due to an unforeseen conflict, that the group will operate just fine without me.

We jointly create a master calendar at the beginning of every school year for our regular meetings, interjecting CRESS deadlines for focus questions, abstracts, and final drafts into the calendar. I build into the plan a little lead-time so that the final drafts don’t drag on into the summer. To help see ourselves as part of the “bigger picture” and to feel a part of a community of teacher researchers, we also include the CRESS Supper Seminars at U.C. Davis as two of our regular meetings. The supper seminars have expert speakers, helpful workshops, collegial discussions, and of course the all important fine cuisine. Hearing and reading the voices of fellow teachers on a journey similar to our own reassures us that we are not alone in our questions and struggles in teacher inquiry. In addition, and for much the same reasons as for the Supper Seminars, I highly encourage group members to attend the annual, CRESS-sponsored “Voices from the Classroom” Conference where they gain exposure to the questions, issues, and writings of others in the teacher research movement. The conference also has the advantages of longer periods of in-depth research discussions and of higher levels of group bonding. Everyone has a great time, and we leave with renewed vision and energy. These professional activities provide the expertise and resources that I alone as facilitator could not possibly provide. It is reassuring to know that I do not have to “reinvent the wheel” for available resources, direction, and support every school year. I simply encourage new members to join the community which already exists.
These are but a few examples of the mistakes I’ve made and learned from in over a decade of a variety of teacher research experiences. The art of facilitating is illusive because it involves group “chemistry,” individual personalities, cultural perspectives, and other human subtleties. However, my experiences, observations, personal reflections, and feedback from others have all reinforced the idea that, above all, an effective facilitator strives to nurture a team environment; the vitality of the group is dependent upon the active participation of every individual member.

The more I’ve learned how to let the group run itself, the more I’ve come to trust that the very nature of the teacher research process fosters individual ownership. Participants have their own “wonderings” about their profession and need to be encouraged to explore and develop their own research focus rather than to have an artificial assignment imposed upon them. Fellow researchers will most likely not discover easy answers or solutions to their queries—in fact I frequently suggest that their questions will most likely lead to other related questions and that they may need to pursue their questions over a number of school years. However, together we pursue the art of inquiry in order to discover ways we may enrich our own learning as well as that of our students.

The Armijo group and I have jointly shared the responsibility of building a cohesive and effective teacher research community; each individual has had a personal interest in the process, we have all shared responsibilities in our meetings, and our journey together has been infused with our own unique brand of humor.

Troy Burke has been teaching high school Social Science for twenty-two years and has been a mentor teacher for the Fairfield-Suisun Unified School District for nine years. He is currently the Social Science department chair and teacher/coach of the Academic Decathlon team of Armijo High School. Troy has been involved in teacher research for the past decade, as researcher, facilitator, and coordinator. He believes that a sense of humor is a key element for both students and teachers to enjoy learning together. The “spirit of wit and jesting” has become a trademark of his merry band of fellow teacher researchers.
Protocol for Setting Norms for a Teacher Research Group


Protocol for Setting Norms

Sometimes facilitators follow Fears and Hopes with this protocol, saying something like, “what norms do we need to increase the likelihood that our hopes will be realized and our fears allayed?” Nancy Mohr learned this protocol from Fran Vandiver, a former Florida principal. They were together in a school coaches’ training that wasn’t going well. Fran suggested that the group set norms, and Nancy thought at first that this was a terrible idea. “After all,” she said to herself, “everyone here is an adult.” This is a common naive assumption, akin to “Why can’t we start off with a long lecture? After all, everyone chose to learn about this topic,” or “Why can’t we just have a conversation about this controversy or conflict? I’m sure everyone will have something constructive to say.”

Purpose

We set norms first of all to curtail some unproductive behaviors (for example, “Don’t monopolize the airtime”). We also set them to give ourselves permission to be bolder than we might otherwise be (for example, “take some risks here”). And we set them in order to remind ourselves that people learn in different ways (for example, “Give everybody time to think”). Norms are especially useful when newcomers are likely to arrive after the work is already under way (and this happens frequently in professional learning groups). When newcomers arrive, the norms fill them in. They don’t have to learn them through trial and error. Norms are also useful when “tricky” conversations are likely (and tricky conversations are frequent in real-life groups).

Details

Norm-setting can take 10 minutes or much longer. Once a group that Nancy Mohr was facilitating took an hour to decide whether airtime should be restricted. The vociferous objections to this proposed norm came from a group of men used to dominating meetings they attend. But the norm was set despite their objection, and later one of them confessed publicly how much he had learned from listening for a change.

Steps

1. Brainstorming. The facilitator encourages the group to brainstorm all possible norms, and lists the offerings on chart paper. But the process begins with a few moments of silence as people consider what they want to offer. The facilitator also participates in the brainstorming, adding whatever seems lacking for the emerging list—for example, “We want to create a place that is safe enough in order for us to endure discomfort,” or “We want to be allowed to take a risk.”

2. Discussion. The facilitator says, “So far this is just a brainstormed list—we have not yet agreed to it. Is there something which needs discussion, which you want to question?”

3. Synthesis. In a transparent way—that is, voicing his or her deliberations aloud—the facilitator synthesizes and fine-tunes: “I think that what I’m hearing is that we want to be assured that good judgment will prevail. There can be situation where a phone must be left on, and we don’t want to prevent that when needed. On the other hand, we don’t want a bunch of phones ringing. So maybe the norm should be that we will only leave phones on when our judgment tells us we must. This is good. I was going to just say ‘No phones,’ but this is much better.”

4. Consensus. Noting that consensus means that all group members can live with and support the norms, the facilitator moves the group to affirm the list.

Facilitation Tips

The facilitator should point out to the group that we call these things “norms” because they are not “rules.” Norms require flexibility yet provide guidance. Moreover, norms can be changed at any time. Indeed, norms that are intended to serve the group over a period of time are useful only if they are revisited with some regularity. Therefore, it is good to reflect on them from time to time: “How are we doing with our norms?” Meanwhile, for groups that meet over time, the chart paper with the norms can be carried over from meeting to meeting. Reviewing how the norms worked can be a good closing activity.

Variation

When time is really short the facilitator can provide a list of norms for the group’s consideration. Two excellent facilitators we know, Daniel Baron and Gene Thompson-Grove, both of the National School Reform Faculty, sometimes say: “There is only one norm: If you think it, say it. If you wonder it, ask it.”
Setting Up Writing Groups 22-28

“The Teacher Research Group as Writing Group:
A Reflection on a Process”
Writer’s Workshop Procedures
Questioning Strategies for Writing Groups
Suggestions for Successful Writing Groups
Tips for Writing Groups
The Teacher Research Group as Writing Group: A Reflection on a Process
contributed by Michelle M. Campbell

For me, teacher research has always meant a paper. Don’t get me wrong. I love experimenting with alternative forms of presentation, and I always try to attend workshops at the Voices Conferences where I can learn about artistic forms and other “alternative” measures. Maybe it’s because I’m an English teacher. Mainly, I think it’s because every research group I’ve participated in at James Rutter Middle School over the last ten years has functioned as a writing group. In my discussions with other researchers and group facilitators, I’ve come to realize that the Rutter group is something of an anomaly. What I’ve always assumed was normal is actually quite unusual. Where our group members write together and freely share and discuss the writing they do about their research, other groups seem to meet only for discussion and keep their writing separate and private. The more I shared Rutter’s practices with other facilitators, the more I realized that others find what we do interesting. A couple of people asked for tips or a description of what we do, and I decided that I could best address the issue through a reflection of our group’s process. How does our teacher research group function as a writing group? What processes and practices do we use that other groups might find useful?

The Rutter group doesn’t share writing well because of anything I’ve done. Nor is this sharing a function of the particular membership of the group. As long as I’ve been involved in research at Rutter the groups have been focused on writing, and the membership has changed with each passing year. I guess it’s part of the cultural norm of teacher research at James Rutter.

Setting norms is important for any group, and I think it’s truly a key factor in developing a teacher research group. Facilitators need to help groups set parameters and expectations. If everyone is clear on the expectations from the beginning, I think things go more smoothly and people get more accomplished. With our group we begin our first meeting with discussions and sharing of writing. Returning researchers are asked to bring the papers they wrote at the end of the previous school year. This serves two major purposes. First, it allows the group to hear how the research and the paper turned out. We are always very busy at the end of the year, and we don’t have time to share our final products. Sometimes we’re writing right up to the due date. Second, it allows new members to see some sample end products. Those new to research are sometimes overwhelmed by the thought of having to develop a question, collect data, and then compile some sort of final product. Seeing something a colleague has completed shows them that it is doable! A bonus: in sharing their final product, the writer/researcher often is reminded of a question that surfaced in the writing, a new direction they wanted to go, or even a rough spot they are still hoping to revise prior to presenting at a workshop or conference, or even pursuing publication.

Since our meetings are only two hours long, not everyone shares at that first meeting. This year, I asked for volunteers to share and two did so. We then set up a schedule for the next two meetings so that everyone who wanted to share was able to. Sharing and discussing two papers per meeting took 45 minutes to an hour each time. Our remaining time at the first session was spent setting up group expectations, setting meeting dates and due dates, answering questions for new folks, discussing possible topics people were already considering, and then doing some writing.

Our group found the list of prompts Janet Papale provided at the Facilitators’ Institute to be very helpful. Janet talked about “writing as a way to thoughtfulness”. Although the James Rutter group has always held writing as central to the teacher research process, I wanted to beef up our writing time and use it to make our meetings more focused and purposeful. As I’m sure happens in many groups, oftentimes our meetings would digress into venting if we weren’t careful. Our group decided at the first meeting that we needed a little bit of time to vent and unwind, but that we also needed our meetings to be focused so that we could keep moving towards our goals. As a way of staying focused, we agreed that we wanted time to write and share at each meeting.
We’ve had a similar plan in years past. Oftentimes we’d write without a real focus or direction. Sometimes that writing would lead us to a question, more often than not it wouldn’t. Many times we took so long, several meetings and several months, to even come up with a question that thinking about data wasn’t really an option... you’d just grab what you could and make it work. In one of Janet’s writing sessions last July I noted, “Getting it all down first allows people to go back and narrow later. Or go back and try something new if your first question resolves itself quickly or becomes something you’d rather not do.” This fit perfectly with what the Rutter group and I wanted to do. We teach our students to brainstorm and freewrite to help figure out what it really is they want to say, but so often as teachers we skip those formative steps and jump right into the draft. I made a list of “Possible Prompts” during that same session with Janet:

- What are the gaps?
- What do you want to write down so you don’t forget?
- 5 things you feel good about in classroom, 5 concerns
- Meet and reread last year’s papers, reexamine notes at early (first) meeting.
- What were the issues you were thinking of at the end of the year?
- Have people commit to presenting/discussing their data. Schedule it! Maybe 2 people per meeting?

I figured these would work perfectly. Heck, we were already sharing last year’s papers. I decided to try working the other pieces into our agendas. We ended our first meeting with “Write about five things you feel good about that are going on in your classroom.” I was worried when people struggled to think of five, and decided not to have them also write about their concerns just yet.

At the start of the second meeting we shared those five good things. Several people mentioned that they had struggled last time, but now had more good things to add. This got our meeting started on a very positive note. Then two people shared past research. After discussing the papers we wrote to “What do you want to write down so you don’t forget?” This became a staple in our meetings. We’d use it so we wouldn’t lose that great idea or new question that had surfaced during the discussion. We closed the meeting with “Write about five concerns you have about what’s going on in your classroom.” Those five concerns became the jumping off point at our next meeting, and for many people the kernels of their research questions were found in those concerns. Some concerns had already resolved themselves by the next meeting, others just weren’t that big of a deal, but there were always one or two that were still a problem that the researcher was interested in solving. An extended period of writing time helped to flesh these concerns out. We ended the third meeting with more sharing and then “What do you want to write down so you don’t forget?”

By our fourth meeting most members of the group had a question, and had a solid chunk of journaling to go with it! This was progress! At this meeting we discussed data options. After a little bit of brainstorming we settled down to write. Our focus was on the kinds of data we wanted to collect, any data we already had, and how we might use it. At this point we set up a schedule of data sharing. Much like we had shared our past papers, we’d bring and share data. This worked well for us and we were able to talk through what we were collecting and get input from colleagues as to how we might use information, or what gaps we might still need to work on.

Then came WARP #1. At the meeting before it was due, everyone brought a draft. It didn’t have to be polished, and they didn’t have to bring copies for everyone, but some did. Here’s where we truly clicked as a writing group. Each member shared their WARP. Some shared the whole piece, while others shared only a passage. Some had specific parts they wanted help with, others felt okay and just wanted to share and be done. We followed the ground rules we’d set at our first meeting:

- The person who shares their own writing:
  - briefly explains where they are in their process
  - explains what kind of feedback they’d like from the group
offers no excuses about the writing
reads their piece aloud, asks a peer to read it aloud, or passes out copies for silent reading

The rest of the group:
listens or reads quietly
makes notes in order to give feedback
provides feedback and/or asks questions to help the writer revise

Betty Van Ryder sets out “Guidelines for Writing-Group Members” in her chapter “Writing Groups: A Personal Source of Support” in the book Teacher as Writer: Entering the Professional Conversation. I found many of the chapters in the book helpful, and Van Ryder’s chapter provides very clear information about how to set up a writing group. She supports her information with an interesting description of her own writing group. I think the chapter would be a great read for any teacher research group looking to change the way they approach writing and sharing writing.

The rest of our meetings followed the same pattern. Often, the writing that is shared is an excerpt from the journal entry written that meeting, or a snippet from an observational or reflective journal written about their research since the last meeting. At some meetings everyone shares, at others only one or two. It depends on how much writing is shared and the amount of assistance the writer requests. Following sharing and feedback we always try to have some quiet writing time. This allows the writer to get down ideas about how to revise or a new direction and it gives the responders time to reflect on their own writing or research and what they might like to do next.

As the year goes on members of the group often email each other drafts of their paper or provide each other hard copies to get feedback between meetings. Some buddy up to get individual responses. One member of our group is a truly gifted editor. We go to her with issues of grammar and punctuation. Some group members write in a very chatty, relaxed style, like me, while others are more formal and academic. By sharing and discussing our writing, we tend to balance each other out and help keep the writing from going too far one way or the other.

In Teacher-Researchers at Work, MacLean and Mohr talk about “deadline drafts.” Their chapter “Dissemination: How do you go public with your research?” is another great resource for the teacher researcher/writer. Deadline drafts are perfect for sharing in writing/teacher research groups. Since the writer is expected to share, they must get something down on paper. This is a great way to keep things moving along towards that end goal!

Although not every research project needs to end in a paper, I believe that they all need to be shared somehow. Writing, to me, is an awesome communicative tool. The written form is both easily accessible and easily adaptable. It can be converted to an oral presentation, published in a journal, or put on the internet for wider dissemination. If teacher research groups can also function as writing groups, then the individual research writer will have an easier time developing and finally publishing their work to share with the larger community. Write on!

Bibliography

WRITER’S WORKSHOP PROCEDURES
contributed by Dale Lee

1. Each writer brings enough copies of his/her paper for each member of the group.
2. A writer briefly outlines the research question, background information, overview of main ideas, etc.
3. The group reads the paper and makes notes on copies of the paper.
4. The writer remains silent as the group discusses the paper. They first point out the positive aspects of the paper, then they ask questions that the writer could consider in revising his/her paper. The writer takes notes on the discussion points.
5. The writer addresses the questions and comments of the group.

Teacher Research Timeline and Meeting Dates Showing Time Allotted for Writer’s Workshop: James Rutter Middle School

- September 18: Share papers from last year
- October 16: Research question: quickwrite and share
- November 13: Begin collection of data

**December 18 WARP 1: Research question—writer’s workshop**
- January 8: Quickwrite: formal discussion of data collection

**February 26 WARP 2: Data analysis—writer’s workshop**
- March 13: Voices Conference
- March 12: Begin drafting—share introductions

**April 16: Continue drafting—writer’s workshop**

**May 14: Finished drafts—writer’s workshop**
- May 28: Revisions?
- June 11: Refinement
- June 25: Papers due

Area 3 Writing Project
Sacramento Delta, Valley, & Sierra

Peer Review and Writing Response Groups

Questioning Strategies for Writing Groups
Contributed by Gloria Maxwell, Leadership Institute, 1998

1. What did you like?
2. What did you find particularly effective, interesting, unusual or provocative?
3. What surprised you?
4. What words or phrases jumped out at you?
5. How effective was the opening of the piece in making you want to continue to read?
6. Were there enough specifics to keep you interested and informed?
7. Was the piece organized in a way that made sense and seemed appropriate?
8. Was the ending powerful?
9. Did the writer lose you at any point?
10. Did you learn anything interesting from the piece?
11. Were there any parts of the writing that could use further development?
12. Were there any parts that seemed superfluous or even got in the way of your reading?
Don’t keep quiet if something bothers or upsets you. Nothing can undermine a writing group more than unspoken resentment or hurt.

Discuss and agree upon procedures on the first day.

Be supportive and critical.

Be frank, but constructive. Start with what you like but don’t withhold comment on what you think doesn’t work. Keep the little points until last. Comment first and mainly on the overall purpose of the piece and its organization. Then move to style and word choice. Be text specific instead of general. Sometimes phrasing a comment as a question is less threatening to a writer than making a direct statement of opinion. Some teachers are very sensitive about their writing—not unlike students. Egos get hurt easily in some people. Honest response needs to be done tactfully, particularly to a person who is not too secure with his or her writing.

Don’t try to change the writer’s style. Work within her or his framework.

Be positive. It never helps to simply point out what you think the piece needs. Ask people what they are getting at. Tell them where you have problems as a reader. Suggest things that would help you get closer to where they want readers to be. Telling someone that a paragraph “isn’t good” won’t help him or her see what would make it better.

Don’t discuss collateral issues—experiences you’ve had like the one in the paper, the way you’d write it, the point you’d make. The person who wrote the paper is trying to get at something and the writing group’s work is to help him or her get there.

Adapted from “Tips for Response Groups” in the NWP Institute packet (originating site not specified)
Tips for Writing Groups

1. Each member of the response group shares in the responsibility of providing feedback for each writer. A response group suffers when one or two people dominate. To ensure that response group work will be equally distributed among its members, it’s good to decide in advance how the group will operate.

   • After a writer has read her or his piece aloud, (while others follow on their copies), do group members want some moments of silence so each responder can go back through her or his copy to record reactions? Or...
   • After a writer has read, do group members want to respond spontaneously, then take time to go back through the piece and record reactions?
   • Do writers want to ask members of the group for specific feedback about some particular aspect of the piece being read?
   • Should it be up to each writer to say whether or not he wants help in grammatical correctness?
   • How much time should the group spend on each writer’s work?

2. Go for the forest ----------------> then the trees.

   • Tell the writer your general impressions first. Tell the writer what worked in the piece, what you were drawn to. Tell the writer why that particular part worked for you. (Be specific!)
   • Ask questions when parts are unclear or underdeveloped. Tell the writer why you want more information about a particular moment. Write your questions in the margins.
   • Sometimes a writer needs a couple of paragraphs to get started, before he or she really gets rolling. Is there a place, further down the page, that might offer a more dynamic beginning?

3. Avoid the following:

   • Letting writers talk too much before reading their paper. Minimize “ritual apologies” by just saying “ritual apologies” and get to the written piece.
   • Taking over the writer’s work and doing the writing for him or her. Practice asking the kind of questions that will let writers uncover more direction for themselves.
   • Telling writers how their experience relates to an incident in your own life and then turning the attention on yourself instead of the piece at hand.
   • Making too many demands on writers. Writers should listen and consider what their partners are asking without having to orally respond to each comment or question. (Nor do writers have to use all the suggestions from their group members.)
   • Getting sidetracked into a discussion of the experience itself in place of a discussion on the writing.

4. Strive to achieve a balance of support and suggestion.

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