

FLYING SOLO

TEACHERS TAKE CHARGE OF THEIR LEARNING THROUGH SELF-STUDY RESEARCH

By Anastasia Samaras

Change begins from the inside. As Daniel Pink (2009) says, intrinsic motivation and drive come from autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Successful reform efforts originate from the ground up. Teachers are growing increasingly frustrated with an educational system that they perceive they are powerless to change. However, teachers are not powerless: The one thing teachers know they can change is themselves. What might happen if teachers are asked to choose to study their own dilemmas of practice in an effort to close their students' achievement gaps?

While there has been much discussion about teacher quality and its importance, there has been little conversation about how teachers are motivated to improve the quality of their own practice in order to improve student learning. Teachers are, after all, the direct players, the ones we want to be highly qualified, the ones who are held responsible for improving student learning while attempting to address a flood of standards. How are teachers encouraged to take charge of their professional development to improve the quality of their teaching and close their own achievement gaps?

Teachers, like students, are motivated to learn about



things they care about and that matter to their lives. They are motivated about reforms that have instant applicability to their teaching and their students' learning. The best reforms may be initiated when teachers pose purposeful and applicable questions about their practice that empower a reform change in the first person. This cutting-edge paradigm is known as the self-study school of thought (Samaras & Freese 2006). Imagine if teachers were given these prompts:

1. What question do I most wonder about in my teaching practice?
2. What causes me to wonder about this question?
3. Why is this question important to me? What experiences and perspectives brought me to ask this question?
4. Who would benefit from addressing this question (e.g.



me, my students, my school, a school division, society at large)?

WHAT IS SELF-STUDY TEACHER RESEARCH?

Self-study teacher research is designed to encourage teachers to be agents of their own reform initiatives while working collaboratively with school colleagues. It has proven useful to an array of educators coming from multiple disciplines and programs (Kosnik, Beck, Freese, & Samaras 2006). In self-study, teachers critically examine their actions and the context of those actions as a way of developing a more consciously driven mode of professional activity, as contrasted with action based on habit, tradition, or impulse. Self-study allows teachers to plan, enact, and assess their pedagogical strategies with the support and critique of professional colleagues while examining the im-

pact of their efforts on student learning. Although self-study is a recursive process, the following steps provide guidelines for teachers who are new to self-study research (Samaras, 2011).

HOW DO I PRACTICE SELF-STUDY RESEARCH?

STEP 1: Author your own question.

Self-study teachers initiate questions about their own practice, which they generate from observations of and personal experiences within their classrooms. The tensions teachers choose to examine are opportunities for professional growth and learning.

STEP 2: Work with a critical friends team.

Self-study requires critical collaborative inquiry. Self-study teachers work with critical friends in an intellectually safe and supportive community to improve their practice by making it explicit to themselves and to others through critical collaborative inquiries. Self-study is personal and interpersonal with learning, thinking, and knowing arising through collaboration and feedback from others. Working with colleagues helps extend and transform an individual's understanding. Critical friends encourage and solicit respectful questioning and divergent views to obtain alternative perspectives, and they work to help validate the quality and legitimacy of each other's claims.

STEP 3: Plan new pedagogies for improved learning.

The purpose of self-study is improved learning. Teachers must ask, "What is the value of this research to others?" This deliberate questioning leads to improved teaching to impact student learning. Improved learning includes teachers' understanding of what works and what doesn't work in their teaching. What if a teacher's research does not result in hoped-for outcomes? Teachers, like all learners, learn from their mistakes. In their research efforts, teachers are learning what works and what doesn't work, and that is progress.

A teacher's self-study project

By Libbie Roberts

STEP 1: Author your own question.

I teach 9th-grade English in a public high school with a diverse population of students from 42 countries who speak 34 languages. Ten percent of our students are enrolled in English for Speakers of Other Languages and 12% of our students are enrolled in special education. Overall, 25% of our students have limited English proficiency, and 39% of our students receive free or reduced lunch.



Roberts

As part of the English 9 curriculum, students must write a formal research paper. Students engage in research constantly, but there is little resemblance between the research in their real lives and the formal research paper that my colleagues and I feel bound to teach by the state standards. I was interested in ways to make the unit and the paper more authentic to students' learning while still meeting the standards. In authoring my self-study question, I asked, "How can I design my instruction to assist students in gathering adequate information about their research topic to write a well-developed paper that is personally meaningful to them?"

STEP 2: Work with a critical friends team.

For the research project, I collaborated with two librarians from my school and two critical friends from my university class. Unexpected insights came out of our collaboration. With my col-

leagues, I revamped the assignment to make it more relevant to students' lives. We abandoned topics I had previously assigned to students and designed an open-choice assignment. We asked: What do people in the real world do when they want to learn about something? That is when we realized we had made the students' research experience less authentic, not only by mandating the topics, but by assigning the paper up front. We had also complicated the situation by teaching about plagiarism, citations, and note taking before allowing the students to browse, question, wonder, and research. We realized this approach caused students to dread rather than look forward to researching a topic. The students went into the library not to read and learn, but to find enough information to fill out the required number of note cards. Our theory that increasing student engagement and making the process more authentic would result in better papers proved true, and my students had more success than they had before with research papers. The process of engaging with other teachers in critical inquiry allowed me to discover solutions I would not have arrived at on my own.

STEP 3: Plan new pedagogies for improved learning.

My efforts resulted in meaningful student research and greater motivation, particularly for students who struggled to take ownership of their learning. My students' improved work gave me tangible proof that it is possible to teach state standards in a manner that allows for student choice and creativity. It does not have to be one or the other. I am excited to go back to the drawing board and look at other ways that I can reignite my teaching by emphasizing student choice. The process of engaging in self-study has reconfirmed the value of taking time to reflect on my teaching and to actively seek solutions and alternative ideas. During this process, I was my own critic, and, as a result, I have a new understanding

STEP 4: Enact, document, and assess your research process.

Self-study requires a transparent research process that clearly and accurately documents the process through dialogue and critique with colleagues. It necessitates that teachers are open to outside views, questions, and critique. Self-study teachers strive to make their practice explicit to themselves, as well as to others. Critical friends who ask probing questions and offer alternative perspectives and interpretations enhance the transparency of the research process.

Making a study public allows it to be available for review and critique.

through presentation and publication. Making a study public allows it to be available for review and critique. It contributes to the accumulation of pedagogical, content, and issue-based knowledge and serves to build validation across related work.

WHAT DOES SELF-STUDY LOOK LIKE?

The five steps of self-study teacher research can make a difference in learning. See the article above for an example of self-study research in action. Explore excerpts from one teacher's project to understand the five steps of a successful study and to see evidence that the self-study teacher research resulted in reformed instruction that in turn benefited students.

of the value and professional ethics of consciously examining my teaching practices.

STEP 4: Enact, document, and assess your research process.

I used various pedagogical strategies to tap into my students' research interests. I surveyed the students, asked them to share their ideas with their class peers, and provided time for them to research subtopics to help them focus on a question. My multiple and varied data sources included 11 data collection instruments: student interest survey; brainstorming activities; teacher reflective journal entries; reading days; time samples; critical friends memos; student surveys after reading days; student outlines; student note cards; librarian questionnaire; and observations using the librarian questionnaire. Each data instrument offered me a way to better see students' learning needs.

STEP 5: Generate and share what you learned.

I was convinced that the changes I made in teaching this 9th-grade research unit resulted in more meaningful learning for my students. My students were able to master all of the essential state-required skills more easily than in years past. As I went into to this project, I was aware that my method of teaching the research unit did not align with my values of a student-centered classroom. Now I have introduced student choice and provided opportunities for students to conduct authentic research.

The motivation and success of my students during a unit that admittedly has little resemblance to real-life research adds further evidence that student choice facilitates learning. An important aspect of authentic learning is making the reading and research in our classes relevant to our students' lives and experiences. If we do that, our students will agree to learn things they perceive as less valuable, like putting the period after the parenthesis.

WHO BENEFITS?

What is the value of a self-study like the one described here for teachers and students? Who benefits from addressing this question? Often the questions teachers raise challenge their own ways of doing things. In turn, that classroom questioning is set within the larger context of their school. Not only did the teacher reframe her thinking about student choice in a writing assignment, but she rethought her attitude about students' abilities. Her students are more interested in writing, and her colleagues are curious about implementing similar pedagogies in their classrooms. On an individual and collective level, teachers can generate new practices that improve their professional development and contribute to the knowledge base of quality in teaching. Those new practices can be generated through the self-study process.

IMPACT ON STUDENT LEARNING

After several weeks of brainstorming, journaling, and conferencing, students had decided on their topics and were looking for their first book source. A new student, Diane, was suddenly transferred into my class. She is a 20-year-old Latino student coming to English 9 from the ESOL program. She is also the mother of a 2-year-old daughter. I was a bit distressed to discover her sudden transfer, not because I did not welcome her, but rather because it was the last period of the day in the middle of a challenging situation. As I was getting the other students started, I quickly summarized the project for her. I said, "Look, we're going to be doing research on something that interests us. So, while the students are looking for their books today, I want you to sit down and make a list of everything you think you may want to learn about. What would you like to learn to do?"

Later in the period, after the students had found books and settled down to read, I checked in with Diane. I was amazed to see that her paper was covered. She had a long list of things she wanted to learn about, and she had two themes: How to do well in school and graduate, and how to be a good mom. She decided to investigate how to be a good mom. We went to the online catalog, she typed in her topic, and within minutes, she was browsing the shelves. I was struck by how different this experience would have been for her last year, when she would have been sitting at the table with note cards answering questions about an assigned topic that had nothing to do with her life and would in no way benefit her daughter.

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