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Editorial Introduction

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by Gordon Wells

It gives me particular pleasure to introduce this special issue by members of the Developing Inquiring Communities in Education Project (DICEP). For eight years, while I was at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto, I was a member of DICEP, and even now I still continue my participation - from a distance. Without any doubt, DICEP has been the major influence on the work I have been doing during the last decade.

DICEP began in 1992 as a research group committed to investigating the role of talk and inquiry in the learning and teaching of science in the elementary and middle school years. Supported by a grant from the Spencer Foundation, we began as a small collaborative group involving four teachers, two OISE faculty and one Research Officer. Our plan was to combine teacher action research and the research of the university faculty with the intention of increasing understanding and improving practice on the part of all concerned. The early years were interesting in many respects. In the first year we met as an M.Ed. class, reading and discussing papers by authors ranging from Vygotsky, through Eleanor Duckworth, to Judith Newman and her teacher research group; we experimented with methods of collecting and analyzing data; and we viewed and discussed observations from the teacher members' classrooms. In the following year, now meeting voluntarily in our own time once a month, we continued the pattern we had established, supplemented by an email list. In 1994, with a further grant from the Spencer Foundation we broadened the scope of our research to include inquiry in all areas of the curriculum. At the same time, the group expanded considerably and we also developed a more democratic organization. However, there were still some tensions within the group, particularly about the relative importance of individual teachers' inquiries and the systematic analysis of the discourse data that were being collected during the course of these inquiries. In the end, I believe both agendas were met, and reports of both have been published in a variety of places. Probably the most important is the edited collection, *Action, Talk and Text* (Wells, 2001), which is reviewd in the final section of this issue. A significant indication of the extent to which we had learned to work comfortably on multiple agendas was the inclusion in that book of a chapter by one of the teacher members of the group, based on interviews with all members on their perceptiojns of "how we had grown" (McGlynn Stewart, 2001).

Now, with their current work, the group has come fully of age. In July 2000 I left Toronto to take up a position at the University of California at Santa Cruz (yes, the climate was one of the attractions) but did so hoping and believing that DICEP would continue, taking new directions perhaps and welcoming new members, but remaining true to the focus on inquiry and the commitment to collaborative research. My belief has been fully justified. In the years since I left, the group has secured further funding from the Spencer Foundation and it has also entered a new phase of research. The articles in this issue are one of the outcomes of this more recent work.

In the later part of the second grant period, we began to see how the classroom focus on inquiry was, as we had hoped, bringing about changes in student participation. However, this was not only seen in a higher level of student engagement; by being involved in ongoing teacher research, and by reflecting on both the processes and the products of their learning, they were

also becoming partners in the research. In the most recent phase, therefore, the DICEP group decided to make "coinvestigation" the focus of their inquiry. What further changes in students' dispositions and in their ability to take a "metacognitive stance" to their learning might occur if they were explicitly invited to be co-researcheers in their own classrooms?

Before introducing the various articles in this issue, however, it is important to add some further information about the current members of DICEP. Not surprisingly, the membership has changed over the years, as members moved away from Toronto or took on new responsibilities. However, four of the teachers from phase two are still involved, though only two are currently teaching in public school classrooms. Of the members who have recently joined, one is a high school special education teacher and another a university teacher educator. The initial focus on talk in science in K - 8 classrooms has thus broadened considerably: inquiry as an approach has been found to be an effective way of organizing learning in settings beyond the school classroom; similarly, the topics being investigated extend beyond the academic curriculum. Finally, talk continues to be the major source of evidence about what and how students are learning, which is not surprising since language, as Halliday states,"is the essential condition of knowing, the process by which experience becomes knowledge" (1993, p.94).

The articles that follow are ordered according to the age of students that the author teaches. The first article, by Zoe Donoahue, arose from a collaboration with a colleague in her school while Zoe was on leave. The question they set out to answer was whether they could teach a required unit from the mandated science curriculum for grade four in a way that would engage the students' interest: "We decided to look at how we could structure a unit on Sound so that the children could help to plan the unit and how they would learn about sound. Rather than the teachers looking at the question alone, the students would co-research along with us." Having matched the students' initial questions with the specified curriculum outcomes, the community as a whole negotiated what activities they would undertake to meet both the students' and the Ministry's objectives. Donoahue's article then gives a detailed description of how they proceeded. Of particular interest is the technique through which the students were involved as co-researchers. From their comments, it is clear that they both learned a lot and "had fun"; they also developed some sophistication in recognizing what sorts of activities were good for what purposes. But perhaps most important, the positive answer the collaborating teachers arrived at with respect to their initial question provides excellent ideas for those who face a similar predicament.

Greta Davis's research was also generated by a predicament. Her students wanted to introduce an incentive scheme into their classroom community's mode of operating. Despite her antipathy to such forms of extrinsic motivation, Davis decided to let her students try out their plan. As she recounts, it was not long before there were complaints, so a class meeting had to be called to attempt to resolve the difficulties. However, as the students began to think more deeply about the nature of the problems they were encountering, they came to recognize that competition for points and the rewards they could buy was at odds with the collaborative and democratic principles on which their community was based. After a considerable amount of very worthwhile discussion they came up with a revised proposal. Rewards should go to the class as a whole rather than to individuals; all would be responsible for earning the rewards and all would benefit from them. As Davis found, by encouraging her students to take responsibility for administering

and evaluating the incentives scheme, what started as a potentially divisive proposal ended up strengthening the classroom community and encouraging all to give of their best in their individual ways.

"Confused" is how Maria Kowal started the year. Uppermost among her concerns was her desire to involve her students as co-researchers in improving the reading component of her grade seven program. (Kowal teaches in a public school where she has responsibility for the major part of her students' learning.) However, the neat research plan with which she started remained hers and not the students'. The solution to this problem arose by chance - as it often does when one listens to what students have to say - in a discussion of Poe's short story, *The Cask of Amontillado*. Warming to the idea of connoisseurship with respect to the drinks they preferred, the suggestion that they should develop connoisseurship with respect to the literature they were reading met with student interest and, over the course of the year, as Kowal reports, it also lead to a new attitude to reading and discussing a variety of literary texts. Her article describes this process with many examples, showing how, " through coinvestigating this aspect of my program with my students, I and they came to gain a deeper understanding of how young adolescent readers can make meaning from the texts they read."

Barbara Bell Angus, a relatively new member of DICEP, also started with a problem when the process of defining a question and carrying out the appropriate action research did not go as smoothly as, she imagined, it did for seasoned teacher researchers. In her article she describes how she came to terms with the messiness and uncertainty that is, so often, a salient feature of researching one's own practice. Working with special education students in high school, she found that she had to abandon - or at least postpone - her initial question about the difference between thinking and knowing, in order to help her students to develop the skills necessary to engage in productive discussion. Watching a videotape of themselves in action provided a good starting point. However, what became apparent was that, from the students' perspective, there were even more pressing issues to resolve: for them, status and power relationships established in the hall and on the street were more important than the actual substance of the discourse.Although this discovery did not allow her to answer her original question, it did enable her to become a more responsive and effective teacher. Now she is ready to embark on the next cycle of action research.

As a teacher educator, Clare Kosnik is constantly trying to make the program she heads as helpful as possible for the prospective teachers with whom she works. Although she had been involved for some time in self-study groups, joining DICEP prompted her to extend her self-study to the courses she teaches and, by inviting their reactions to them, to include her students as co-researchers. Using student responses in semi-structured interviews, she analyzed their views about many aspects of their program and, in particular, their feedback on the courses she teaches. Although this latter experience was sometimes difficult, she learned a great deal about herself and her students; she also benefited from their suggestions, some of which she plans to implement. Her article concludes with her reflections on the process of collaborative self-study.

Since joining DICEP in the early days, Monica McGlynn Stewart has developed a new role as an educational consultant, which involves her in organizing and facilitating events in which groups of post-secondary educators meet to generate plans for the future of their institutions. Although

the nature of this work does not allow the sort of co-research that is possible over a longer period of time, she does place considerable emphasis on collaborative reflection. In her article, McGlynn Stewart also describes how, using "Open Space Technology", she enables participants to engage in the components of the action research cycle as they work toward their chosen goals. Reflecting on three recent experiences of this kind, she sets out eight principles that guide her practice and that, she believes, are relevant to all learning and teaching relationships.

McGlynn Stewart has several times during the existence of the group acted as what she calls the "self-appointed chronicler of DICEP." In the final article in this issue, she reports the results of her most recent invitation to the group to engage in self-reflection. Since the current phase of DICEP's work is different from the past in some significant ways, she felt it would be useful to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of the new order. Using a small number of open-ended questions, she interviewed each of the other members and was herself interviewed. In her article, she summarizes the main issues raised and discussed and illustrates them liberally with quotations from the interviews.

Reading this latest round of "self-study" as an absent member of the group was a strange experience for me. Like Kosnik in her self-study, I felt uncomfortable at times to read how my colleagues had experienced my participation in the group. At the same time, I was both proud and delighted to see the way the group has adapted to the new order and flourished in the process. In this and previous rounds of self-study, the group has not hesitated to grapple with the difficulties that inevitably arise when people with different institutional experiences and different perceived status attempt to create a democratically organized community. However, this issue of Networks is strong evidence of the enduring value of the principles that we forged as we worked together. We hope these articles will help to keep the light burning in these dark times.

References

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