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As a new member of Developing Inquiring Communities in Education Project (DICEP) as well as a rookie action researcher, I feel that my greatest contribution at this time is to chronicle the evolution of my research question through my initial cycle of action research. I hope this article will provide encouragement to other first time action researchers as they wrestle with their initial projects.

In addition to having the incredible support of DICEP, I also had the opportunity to attend The Meeting of the Grantees, Practitioner Research Communication and Mentoring Grant Program, Spencer Foundation and to hear Courtney Cazden and Brenda Powers speak at the beginning of this journey. According to Powers (2000), "the richness is in the incidents in our classroom when the lessons aren't going well." In her comments, Cazden (2000) pointed out that the richness in practitioner research evolves from the dissonance or discrepancy when what occurs is different from what was expected. These comments became my mantra as I wrestled with the development of my research question, as incidents in my classroom did not go as I had expected.

It is the development of my research question and the resolution of the frustration and cognitive dissonance that this process caused that I would like to describe. At the beginning, I expected to define the question, collect the data and, then, write up a report, as I had done in doing quantitative research - and as my colleagues in DICEP seemed to be doing currently with their action research projects. That was not what happened, however, and, consequently, I was discouraged, frustrated and confused. The final resolution will be the completion of this article. Then I will feel that I have completed a cycle of action research and will be ready to begin another.

The Evolution of the Question

Initially, in our grant proposal, I wrote that I wanted to investigate the relationship between students' ability to recognize the difference between thinking and knowing and their ability to negotiate meaning in building discourse in the classroom. In order to accomplish these goals, I realized that I would need to put a greater emphasis on discourse in the classroom. When discourse rather than written assignments became the focus of my class, it became glaringly clear that, as the first step, I would have to work with my students to develop their ability to follow some, what I assumed to be basic, rules of conversation in order to build dialogue in the classroom.

I realize, in retrospect, that I made my first error in defining my initial question. My intent was to combine my academic interest with observations in the classroom. I accomplished that only at a superficial level because my observations in the classroom were not detailed and accurate enough to provide me with sufficient data to pose a question at the appropriate level. However, action research has now provided me with the process for observing classroom interaction in a detailed and systematic fashion. As a result, I will be better prepared to ask research questions that are at a more appropriate level for the students in my classes.

My students, who were in grades 9 to11 and were between the ages of 14 and17, had been identified through the formal identification process at the board level as having special needs relating to learning, and all were receiving special education support. These students had received a modified curriculum throughout most of their school careers. In addition, they came from a low income/underprivileged multicultural area, although English as a second language was not an issue for any of them.

Although I was interested in eventually working with my students on developing their understanding of the difference between knowing and thinking and, subsequently, applying that understanding to literate tasks involving drawing conclusions and making inferences, I began by focusing on the development of my students' abilities to develop and sustain "progressive discourse" (Bereiter, 1994). For my first attempt at this, I purposely chose a small group of four students, three boys in grade 10 and one girl in grade 11, in order to minimize the likelihood of having classroom management problems. During their resource period, the students divided their time between assignments designed to develop their literacy skills and tasks designed to develop their ability to build dialogue. For both written expression and conversation, I presented and illustrated a number of skills and concepts and provided the students with the opportunity to practice them. For conversational skill development, I introduced such concepts as turn taking, listening to their fellow student's contributions and linking their contributions to the previous or preceding comments. To determine if the students were focused on the same learning objectives as I was, I used our "stop action" technique whereby the students are stopped in their work and asked to fill out a questionnaire regarding their interpretation of the task and of their learning.

Four weeks after introducing the conversation time in the resource period, I implemented the "stop action" technique and had the students fill out a questionnaire that included the following three questions:

1. Describe the work you have been doing in class.
2. What have you learned?
3. What do you think the teacher wanted you to learn?

Despite the fact that they were stopped during conversation time, the students' responses to all three questions included, without exception, answers involving written language skills or behaviour. When asked to describe the work they had been doing in this class, the students mentioned such things as: "homework", "grammar sheets", and "enhancing my learning ability".

In answer to the question about what they learned, the students included such items as: "sentence structure", "essay writing", "how to write an resume", and "if you waste time doing unimportant things you will achieve unimportant goals".

In response to the question about what the teacher wanted them to learn they wrote down such ideas as: "expanding our work and answers", "proper grammar", "do our homework", "how to contrate", "how to work independently", "how to make yourself improve in your weak areas", "to learn to focus", "to focus and stay on task in order to be independent", and "to build my spelling skills". Oral language skills were not mentioned by any student.

The students were accurate in describing the written language skills that were some of the goals for part of the course, but they did not include the oral language skills on which I thought they were working when I stopped the action. In an attempt to refocus my students and to remedy the situation, I decided to emphasize the importance of the oral language skill development section of the course by telling them explicitly that I was concerned with developing their oral language skills. I continued to review, discuss and provide opportunities for practicing the discourse skills. Then two weeks later I stopped the action again during conversation time and gave them the same questionnaire to fill out. They gave me the same answers focusing on written language and behaviour expectations.

For a description of the work in this course, the students referred to the written work that was done in the class with such comments as: "homework", "grammar", "paragraph writing", "learning to make a resume", and "improve our writing skills and essay writing".

Similarly, they reported that they learned skills related to written work such as: "expanding essays, different parts of speech, paragraph writing, resumes", "how to concentrate, stay focuses, parts of speech, write proper sentences read with understanding and comprehension" and "parts of speech, essay writing, how to state opinions from facts, grammar and working on resumes".

Then, when asked their opinion of the learning that the teacher wanted to take place, they included the following: "expanding my answers, different parts of speech, paragraph writing", "parts of speech, proper grammar, write stories in paragraph form" and "learn to be independent". Again no one mentioned any of the conversation skills on which I had been focusing for the previous six weeks. Not only had they not made my goals their own, they had not even recognized my goals.

I had expected to see an improvement in my students' conversational abilities so that I could then move on to using that improved ability to sustain "progressive dialogue" in order to help them develop their understanding of the difference between knowing and thinking. That attempt had been unsuccessful. Without an improved ability to construct discourse, I could not pursue my original question. Although I was frustrated at first, it was, as Cazden had predicted, the beginning of more interesting and productive work. So I abandoned the idea of looking at the relationship between my students' abilities to differentiate thinking from knowing and turned my attention to developing their ability to construct progressive discourse.

In order to increase student commitment, I involved the students in designing and evaluating their own assignment. Discourse was no longer the means; it was now the end. Now my question became more basic. If I involve my students in designing the task and evaluating themselves, can I get them to focus on their discourse and to improve it?

Since it was a new semester and I had new students, I worked with eight grade nine students, four girls and four boys, in English class. After the Christmas holidays, the students came to me with questions they wanted answered about my golden retriever, who had been a weekly visitor in our class during the fall while she was pregnant. I had answers to their questions compiled from almost daily emails sent to me by the breeder chronicling the delivery of my dog's puppies. I provided them with the text that answered their questions. Then, in a class meeting, they discussed and agreed on how they wanted to proceed. They decided to divide the class into a girls' group and a boys' group and to have each group design questions for the other group and, then, to pose the questions to each other and to keep track of their score. They carried this out with great interest and enthusiasm and minimal involvement form me. I videotaped the interaction.

Later I had the students view the tape recording of their questioning game without any instructions or direction from me. When the videotape ended I asked the students to tell me what they thought I wanted them to learn. Without any comments from me they spontaneously suggested that I wanted them to learn such skills as: "to respect their answers", "wait till the other person is done saying their answer and then answer the question" and "wanted us to take turns" and "cooperation".

Why did the students in this situation, without any instruction, discern my goals? I think it was because they were also their goals. When the students watched the videotape of their questioning game, they seemed surprised and, in some cases, embarrassed by their comments and by their behaviour. It was then easy for them to identify the skills that needed improvement and they realized that I also wanted them to improve those skills. So although I now had a procedure whereby the students would focus on their discourse and could describe some of the improvements that needed to be made, I still had to devise a way of pursuing the second part of the question: Could they improve their ability to build progressive discourse?

I videotaped student interactions and showed them to the students on a number of occasions. When the students were involved in that process, there was evidence of student awareness and temporary improvement. However, I think there were other more powerful forces at work that could not be overcome in the limited time of one semester. One clip in particular seemed to suggest this. In this segment of tape, a girl was arguing with a boy about the correctness of an answer to a question. The information was in the text that both of them had before them, but neither one of them suggested that they refer to the text. Rather, they repeated their positions until the girl "cut her eye" and raised her shoulder in a particular manner that obviously conveyed meaning, because the boy abruptly withdrew from the competition.

In viewing the videotapes, I had the opportunity for closer analysis and it seemed to me, not only on that occasion but on others as well, that the students were responding to the social hierarchy, focusing on the status and power relationships established in the hall and on the street, rather

than on the meaning of the discourse. Similarly, Nuthall (2002) reported that students' participation in classroom discourse was influenced by their relationships with other students. In working with students, who like mine were from lower income families and enrolled in the less academic stream, Yerrick (1999) found that students saw differences of opinions as status conflicts. He found that attempts to develop discourse were undermined by problems students had with the differences of opinion that seemed to be viewed as status conflicts.

Again I was confronted with an outcome that I had not expected. On the one hand, I found the dissonance frustrating and confusing because I was attempting to create a neat package that I could write up, as my colleagues seemed to be doing, where they stated their question and then proceeded seemingly in a straight line to investigate it.

However, I have now come to realize that my colleagues were also dealing with the dissonance that resulted when student performance did not meet teacher expectation. The difference was that my colleagues had already had experience with "working through the reflective spirals of action research" (Lewin, McNiff, Wells), whereas I had not. Now that I have the "understanding" of the "plan act, reflect, change" (Dick, 1997) of action research I believe I am prepared to trust the process and to begin a new cycle of action research with optimism. With this "understanding" of the knowledge, I expect to be able to react more productively to the dissonance inherent in the process of defining and redefining the research question.

On the other hand, the discrepancy between what I expected and what occurred forced me to look more closely for answers. Therefore, I scrutinized the videotapes in more detail and discovered critical aspects of student interaction. I believe my observation concerning the influence and power of students' social relationships outside of class will fundamentally change my understanding of and approach to classroom interaction.

Reflections

So although I still haven't addressed my original question, which I continue to think is important and deserving of investigation, I have improved my effectiveness as a teacher in dramatic and noticeable ways. In fact, the power of having students review videotapes of their classroom interaction was so powerful that it was noticed by my teaching neighbour who asked me to come into her classroom to videotape.

Everything that I have found as a result of my attempt at action research seems so obvious. But it was only through careful scrutiny of videotaped recordings and subsequent reflection that I was able to make these observations and, consequently, to change my approach to teaching my high needs students. So, although I have experienced incredible frustration and confusion and I still don't have a neatly packaged research article, I have experienced incredible unpredicted growth as a teacher and consequently, my students have benefited as well.

As I felt the frustration that the dissonance caused when my expectations for the class did not match their performance, I realized I was experiencing the feelings that many of my students confront on a daily basis. I have felt that many of them could be successful if they could work through that frustration of learning new and challenging skills or concepts. Now I have experienced similar frustration and confusion as my students. I found it helpful to work through

this experience, as I often encourage my students to do, in order to move from "knowing knowledge" to "understanding knowledge". (Wells, 1999)

With respect to defining my research question, I have learned that my question must arise more closely from actual classroom incidents. As Newman (1998) says:

Action research begins in the middle of whatever you're doing-- something happens that you didn't expect-and you begin to wonder about what's going on.

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