

Discover how three effective teachers work from an inquiry stance—a process of raising questions and using the data of practice to investigate those questions critically and collaboratively.

Does Learning to Teach Ever End?

by Marilyn Cochran-Smith



The answer to this question is simple and straightforward: No, learning to teach never ends. In fact, learning to teach is no longer thought of as a one-time process of “teacher training” where student teachers are equipped with theory and methods and then sent out to “practice” teaching. Likewise, continued education for experienced teaching is no longer thought of as a process of periodic “staff development” where teachers are congregated into auditoriums to receive the latest updates about teaching techniques.

Instead we now know that learning to teach takes place over time rather than at isolated moments in time. We now know that learning to teach is about raising questions and working with others to generate local knowledge rather than simply receiving information from outside experts and applying it the same way for every student in every context. Simply put, we now know that learning to teach really never does end.

Taking an Inquiry Stance on Teaching

For many years, my colleague Susan Lytle and I have been writing about teacher learning as taking an “inquiry stance” on teaching (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999; 2009). We use the term “inquiry” to refer to teachers’ questions and problem-posing, and we use the metaphor of “stance” to allude to orientation and position. By “inquiry stance,” then, we mean a world view and a critical habit of mind about teaching—a dynamic and fluid way of knowing and being in the world of educational practice that carries across educational settings and informs professional work at all levels.

Working from an inquiry stance is a process of raising questions and using the data of practice to investigate those questions

critically and collaboratively. From this perspective, the major task of teaching is not simply figuring out how to get things done, but also deliberating about what to get done, why to get it done, who decides, and whose interests are served.

When teachers work from an inquiry stance, they engage every day in the life-long process of learning to teach. The examples that follow, which describe the work of three experienced teachers, highlight some of the most important reasons for taking an inquiry stance: enhanced teacher learning, improved student learning, and greater equity for all students.

Inquiry for Teacher Learning

Robin Hennessy has been a middle and high school English teacher for 15 years in three urban public school districts—Worcester, Seattle, and Boston. Since 1999, she has been a teacher and literacy coordinator at Fenway High School, a public pilot school in Boston, where she teaches literacy and language arts courses to students who are primarily African American. A few years ago, Robin wrote this about her work as a teacher:

Today I am not the same teacher that I was in 1994, 1996, or 1999. In fact, I'm not even the same teacher I was last week. The wider I open my eyes, the more my students and others teach me. This happens every day . . . I reflect on my experience as a White woman working with students of color; I wonder what I ever expected of them. I don't know that I was able to see their strengths, and I'm afraid to admit that I don't know if I do now, at least not always. . . . So I have to keep asking: Am I not seeing something in my students' reading, writing, listening, or speaking? I have to remind myself to look more carefully, to see them better.



Based on questions and issues like these, Robin set out to learn more about her students' strengths and the resources they brought to school (Hennessy 2010; 2011).

She intentionally invited the students in her ninth-grade foundations of literacy course to bring their cultural, linguistic, and experiential knowledge into the classroom. For a year, she recorded their conversations, collected all their written and other work, and kept a journal. She wanted to know what would happen when her classroom learning community, which was a racially and ethnically diverse group, built on the students' out-of-school literacies and regarded them as legitimate resources for learning. To do this, she intentionally avoided constantly correcting students' grammar or editing their speech; she honored their requests to write in languages other than Standard English; and she arranged the classroom space to facilitate discussion and move attention away from herself.

Part of what Robin learned was that when their knowledge was recognized as a legitimate resource for learning, many students came to believe that they had the ability and new opportunities to participate in the social and academic tasks of school. Roles and positions shifted, allowing students to work collectively and changing who was considered an expert or novice in discussions. In this new space, Robin and her students talked about critical, but formerly taboo, topics such as race and ethnicity, as these pertained to both literature and students' daily lives. By systematically analyzing the discourse in her class, Robin learned how her instructional decisions and communications had a major impact on students' participation and on their literacy practices.

Inquiry for Student Learning

Gary McPhail has been teaching first and second grade for more than a decade, currently at Shady Hill School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Over a number of years, he noticed that the personal writing that was the focus of the first-grade writing curriculum (e.g., stories about day-to-day life experiences, personal narratives) was particularly appealing to many of the girls and not so appealing to many of the boys in his classes (McPhail 2009a; 2009b). He also noticed that the genres and styles to which the boys gravitated (e.g., comic books, adventure stories, fiction) were considered low-status by many teachers (and parents). He (McPhail 2009b) wrote:

As a male teacher in the primary grades, I have often been struck by the fact that my female students tend to both perform at a higher level with regard to writing proficiency and are far more interested in writing than my male students. . . . Many boys come to realize that their interests are not worthy of being taught in the classroom and as a result come to view writing as more a female activity than male.

He began to raise many questions about what he came to recognize was the "gendered" achievement gap in writing, an educational phenomenon identified nationally and internationally.

Based in part on the interests of his students, Gary created a new year-long writing workshop curriculum that intentionally included some genres of writing that he believed might appeal to boys, some that might appeal to girls, and some new genres for everybody (e.g., letter writing). As he implemented the new curriculum, Gary systematically collected all the students' written work; whole class and individual student interviews; ongoing classroom observation notes concentrating on several boys who had differing levels of writing skill; and biweekly entries in a teacher research journal.

He found that, for the most part and with some overlap, the boys and girls in his class did indeed seem to have differing literacy interests. But, even more important, he discovered that both boys and girls performed at higher levels when they were writing in genres that were of interest to them. With the new writing curriculum, some boys who had never performed well in writing began to blossom. Some girls who always excelled at personal stories struggled, but also learned additional skills when writing in new genres.

Eventually, Gary presented his research at conferences, in print, and in university classes. Just as importantly, he shared what he had found with his school faculty and invited others to join him in a teacher inquiry group focused on students' writing. The group members now have worked together for several years to interrogate their writing practices, unpack their assumptions about boys and girls, and create a new school-wide writing curriculum that responds to the interests of all writers.

Inquiry for Equity of Opportunity

Erin Hashimoto-Martell began her teaching career as an environmental educator in the Santa Cruz Mountains for the public schools of San Mateo County, one of the most diverse counties in California—ethnically, socioeconomically, and linguistically. The program built students' environmental literacy and appreciation within a context that focused on students' social and emotional development as well as their academic learning; this was created through group living within a natural setting. For the last seven years, Erin has taught PreK through eighth-grade science in Boston: one year in a charter school, three years at a two-way bilingual immersion school, and three at a small public elementary school.

In part because of her own status as an Asian-American woman, Erin continually raised questions about science and equity. She wrote:

Why do the students from low socioeconomic backgrounds more often seem more emotionally affected by their week at outdoor education than the other students? . . . If teachers often notice that kids who cannot focus in the classroom actually can focus in the outdoors, why don't we do it more? . . . What if students from urban areas had more opportunities to play in natural areas? . . . How does being in a minority-majority environment affect those students' identities as different from being a minority?



Erin wanted to encourage all her students to develop greater interest in science with the goal of ultimately helping to increase the low numbers of students of color who pursue science in higher education and work.

She engaged in a semester-long inquiry (Hashimoto-Martell 2011a; 2011b) to examine how her teaching practices encouraged or served as barriers for students' formation of science identities. She created a brief survey asking her students about their interests in science; analyzed students' science journals; interviewed students; and kept a teacher research journal. She focused on four students who had shown evidence of developing science identities by being highly engaged in class and asking for additional science opportunities, even though they weren't necessarily top students in all areas.

Erin had assumed that her efforts to support students' science identities would be limited to within her classroom. By systematically looking at the data of practice, however, she learned that students' emerging science identities actually crossed classroom and school boundaries and extended to their interests and activities related to science outside of school. Her recognition of their science experiences outside the classroom as valuable science was key to helping the students see themselves not just as "science students," but as "science people." Connecting science to their lived experiences broadened what her students understood as "science" and provided further opportunities for them to develop science identities.

As a result of the inquiry, Erin concentrated on bridging what she did in the science classroom to the students' experiences outside school and on creating spaces for students to share their outside science experiences. She also worked on home-school connections and opportunities for the students to get to know working scientists.

The Never-Ending Work of Learning to Teach

These descriptions of three very experienced teachers illustrate not simply that the work of learning to teach never ends, but also how important that work is. The point is not that these teachers began teaching not knowing what to do. All three were very successful beginners. The point is that these teachers, like all teachers in the changing world of schools, had to deal with new questions and new problems all the time. They could not know all the answers prior to entering teaching. What they needed to know was how to keep on learning over time—how to pose important questions, how to develop new ways of seeing, how to unpack deeply held assumptions, and how to work with colleagues to transform students' learning opportunities and outcomes. To do this work, taking an inquiry stance is critical. ■

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- Past President of the American Educational Research Association (AERA)
- Elected into the National Academy of Education for her pioneering efforts in teacher education research, practice, and policy analysis
- Inaugural holder of the C. J. Koh Endowed Distinguished Professorship, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
- KDP Laureate Representative on the Executive Council; invited to Laureate Chapter in 2003

What are your areas of expertise and interest?

Teacher education research, practice, and policy; practitioner inquiry and teacher learning across the professional lifespan; teaching/teacher education and issues of equity, diversity, and social justice.

How do you recharge yourself professionally? I work collaboratively on a wide array of projects related to teaching and teacher education with doctoral students, colleagues, and fellow researchers locally, nationally, and internationally.

How do you balance your professional and personal life?

Frequent travel for professional purposes is intertwined with visits to old and new friends in multiple locations.

Recent Work

Cochran-Smith, M., and S. L. Lytle. 2009. *Inquiry as stance: Practitioner research for the next generation*. New York: Teachers College Press.

