

Chapter 1

From Collaboration to Transformation: Practitioner Research for School Librarians and Classroom Teachers

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ABSTRACT

As part of educational reforms, educators are increasingly expected to gather and interpret data, implement initiatives, and analyze outcomes. Practitioner research offers a framework for conducting school-based inquiry; consequently, it can be an instrumental part of educational change. Due to its focus on local contexts, collective knowledge, and critical reflection, practitioner research can foster collaboration between school librarians and classroom teachers. This chapter explicates the core features of practitioner research and discusses new findings from a three-year study of digital literacy conducted by a high school librarian and an English teacher.

INTRODUCTION

The development and implementation of educational reforms can be an extremely complex and multifaceted process. While teachers are primarily responsible for enacting reforms, they may be excluded from the developmental process (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Elmore (2004) explains, “Teachers are seldom asked to judge if a new curriculum translates well into the classroom, nor are they often asked to participate as co-designers of the ideas in the first place” (p. 38). While reforms might position teachers as simply the executors of

plans and objectives, scholars suggest that teachers’ local experiences and practices significantly influence the implementation process of reforms (Coburn & Turner, 2012).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) argue that the tendency to exclude teachers from designing and analyzing education reforms is changing. In particular, they posit that educators are increasingly expected to gather and interpret data as part of initiatives focused on school achievement. For school librarians and classroom teachers, this offers a powerful opportunity to engage in sustained collaboration and to investigate how new tools,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-4361-1.ch001

strategies, and resources work in schools. Technology, in particular, calls the traditional relationship of educators and learners into question (Collins & Halverson, 2009). Since library professionals are considered experts in information literacy and digital literacy, they are poised to collaborate with teachers to integrate technology into the curriculum (Bishop & Larimer, 1999).

In this chapter, I consider: How can practitioner research foster collaboration between school librarians and classroom teachers? In what ways can practitioner research promote technology integration in K-12 schools? To answer these questions, the first aim of this chapter is to highlight the core features of practitioner research. Through its focus on local contexts, collective knowledge, and critical reflection, practitioner research provides insight into how teachers teach and how students learn. Moreover, the process of conducting practitioner research offers teachers and librarians a framework for engaging in sustained collaboration and critical discussion. Librarians' involvement in practitioner research is important in order to both generate new knowledge and to transfer this knowledge to the field of librarianship and information science (Hall, 2010).

The second aim of this chapter is to investigate the process of engaging in practitioner research related to media and technology in schools. According to Lewis (2007), technology integration demands that teachers acquire new orientations to time, space, and design. She adds that veteran teachers as well as pre-service teachers are often uncomfortable with this shift. Lewis (2007) states, "Popular technologies are to be used and shared out-of-school. To do so in school challenges the materiality of what it means to be a teacher, in their minds" (p. 235). Consequently, practitioner research can act as a framework for librarians and teachers to collaboratively and reflectively implement technology in schools.

As a high school English teacher, I worked with my school's librarian to conduct a research project on digital literacy, poetry, and pedagogy

(Curwood & Cowell, 2011). Over the course of three years, we jointly designed, implemented, and reiterated a digital poetry curriculum. We examined how our pedagogy and our professional relationship changed as a result of our collaboration. I gained technical expertise and digital literacy skills while my colleague increased her knowledge of the English curriculum. Notably, our collaboration served as a catalyst for other teachers in the school to partner with our librarian to design and implement technology-enhanced learning opportunities for students. This chapter draws on new findings from this study to offer insight into practitioner research.

BACKGROUND: PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

What is *practitioner research*? Practitioner research is an umbrella term that encompasses many genres and forms of research, including action research and reflexive inquiry. At its core, "the practitioner is simultaneously a researcher who is continually engaged in inquiry with the ultimate purpose of enriching students' learning and life chances" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. viii-ix). Contrary to the view that research is only conducted by outsiders, such as university-based researchers, practitioner research values local knowledge about local practices. As such, it challenges traditional assumptions about the relationship between theory and practice. Booth (2002) argues, "Librarians are regarded as experts at searching for evidence to support the practice of other professionals but are very unlikely to do the same for their own practice" (p. 56). Consequently, practitioner research offers librarians as well as teachers a way to investigate their role within the school community.

The use of the word *practitioner*, rather than teacher, is intentional and emphasizes the role of multiple people within the educational community, including school librarians, teachers, teacher

From Collaboration to Transformation

educators, administrators, and community-based educators. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) explain, “From a perspective of practitioner inquiry, communities are understood as both means toward larger goals and as ends in themselves” (p. 54). In fact, several large-scale studies have found a link between a strong community focus in schools and student performance on achievement tests (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

Practitioner research builds on over three decades of theoretical and empirical work within education, including studies of personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1985), pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987), and classroom knowledge (Carter & Doyle, 1987). Practitioner research, in many ways, embodies *situated cognition*. Rather than understanding cognition as an individual attribute, situated cognition posits that knowing and doing are inseparable (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). In this respect, professional knowledge is inherently situated in social, cultural, and physical contexts. Practitioner research draws on these contexts in order to investigate teaching practices and learning processes.

Rather than focusing on short-term goals or quick fixes, practitioner research aims to disrupt existing structures of power and privilege that serve to marginalize and disenfranchise students. As Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007) note, many school districts mistakenly equate practitioner research with “poring over test scores” (p. xvii). However, practitioner research is much more involved and focuses on challenging the inequities in schools that are perpetuated by the status quo. It draws on multiple data sources to tackle problems that educators have encountered in the course of their pedagogical practice. Often in collaboration with other members of the school community, practitioner researchers work intentionally and systematically to identify and address issues related to teaching and learning.

Marked by test-based accountability, annual school progress reports, and pay-for-performance, the era of No Child Left Behind often threatens to undermine the agency and pedagogy of educators. Practitioner research can inform policy and practice by problematizing the ends question. In other words, what are the end goals of education? According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), practitioner research encourages educators to question the fundamental purposes of teaching, learning, and schooling. The accountability movement in countries such as the United States and Australia makes certain assumptions about teachers’ roles and students’ purposes. Practitioner research questions these baseline assumptions and offers educators a perspective, a framework, and a voice.

What is the *process* of conducting practitioner research? It begins with formulating a research question, continues with ongoing data collection and reflection, includes data analysis, involves reading relevant literature, policy documents, and position statements, and finally, promotes the dissemination of key findings (MacLean & Mohr, 1999). According to Hubbard and Power (2003), “nothing shapes our research as much as the questions we ask” (p. 2). When researchers frame a question, their aim is to make the question open-ended in a way that allows new opportunities to surface. By using the words *how* or *what*, rather than *why* or *who*, Hubbard and Power (2003) suggest that the research question can consider processes and possibilities.

The next step is to determine research methods related to data collection and data analysis. The challenge here is to articulate a *logic of inquiry* (Gee & Green, 1998) that inextricably links and simultaneously justifies researchers’ questions, methods, and contexts. Practitioner research can draw on a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods; part of the researcher’s task is to determine how these methods can best answer a given research question. Since practitioner research

does not exist in a vacuum, it is imperative that the research findings are shared, both within the school community and to other audiences.

How can practitioner research be effectively *evaluated*? Altrichter, Posch, and Somekh (1993) propose four criteria, which include: 1) Considering alternative perspectives: Have the understandings gained from research been cross-checked against the perspectives of those concerned and/or other researchers? 2) Testing through practical action: Have the understandings gained from research been tested through practical action? 3) Ethical justification: Are the research methods compatible with both educational aims and democratic human values? 4) Practicality: Are the research design and data collection methods compatible with the demands of teaching? (pp. 74–81). Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007) posit that while only one of these criteria explicitly addresses ethics, it could be argued that all four are situated within a framework of ethics. They explain that the first criterion attends to the importance of transparency and triangulation, which are key features of ethical practitioner research, while the second criterion calls for change and action as a result of the research. The fourth criterion emphasizes the notion of agency and identity within the framework of practitioner research. In other words, high-quality practitioner research is inherently ethical and educators have an obligation to themselves as well as to the community.

This brief review of the purposes, processes, and evaluation of practitioner research leads to the question: How can practitioner research facilitate collaboration between classroom teachers and school librarians? In order to answer this question, I focus specifically on the issue of technology integration, which is especially salient today given the level of investment in educational technology. I draw on my own experiences as a practitioner researcher and high school English teacher and offer findings from a three-year study in order to explicate the process of conducting research in schools. Technology is part and parcel of many educators' lives. At the same time, new digital

tools are often accompanied by new learning opportunities, new instructional spaces, and new roles for librarians within the school community. Rather than seeing these shifts as threats to the status quo, practitioner research aims to question, reinvent, and transform our understanding of education in a digital age.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER: TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION THROUGH PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

Practitioner research can offer important insights into technology integration. While our modern society continually pioneers new tools and spaces, schools often fail to embrace their inherent potential (Gee, 2004). In many ways, technology can enhance socially situated learning across the curriculum. Digital tools can promote student achievement and engagement through valuing distributed thinking, self-directed inquiry, and collaborative learning (Gomez, Schieble, Curwood, & Hassett, 2010). However, the affordances of technology are only possible when digital tools are readily available and educators have the professional experience and confidence to use them as part of their instructional practice.

While technology is often developed in a global context, it is implemented within a local context. Therefore, classroom teachers and other educators, including librarians and technology coordinators, play an important role in both reform implementation and technology integration (Curwood, 2011). Educators have the power to create and sustain a technology-rich, student-centered, and theoretically grounded curriculum. Practitioner research can highlight the process of technology integration, document the impact on student achievement, and inform educational policy. It's not enough to fund educational technology – we must also invest in professional learning. Since practitioner research encourages educators to question, investigate, document, analyze, and reflect, it can shape our

understanding of the role of technology in schools. In addition, practitioner research can offer a framework to promote collaboration between school librarians and classroom teachers.

THE STUDY

In this chapter, I draw on a three-year study that I conducted in collaboration with my school's librarian, Lora Cowell. We taught at a public school in the Midwestern United States that served 1,800 students. From 2004 to 2007, we investigated our design, implementation, and reiteration of a digital poetry curriculum (Curwood & Cowell, 2011). With iPoetry, we sought to infuse digital practices to enhance students' critical engagement, increase their awareness of audience, and encourage their progressive use of multiple modalities. After students read, critiqued, and wrote poetry using traditional print text, they then employed digital tools to reinterpret those poems using multimodal elements (Curwood & Gibbons, 2009a). Throughout our research, we considered our own professional development process.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) reject prevalent transmission models of teacher professional development and validate teacher-conducted research and local knowledge construction. In order to understand our own pedagogy and our students' learning, our research project involved multiple forms of data. These included: 1) field notes and artifacts related to the process of collaboratively designing, implementing, and reiterating the iPoetry unit; 2) students' digital poetry productions (Curwood & Gibbons, 2009b); and 3) informal and semi-structured interviews with focal students to uncover their perceptions of using digital tools and multiple modalities for self-expression. We used a thematic analysis framework (Boyatzis, 1998) to perform several repeated rounds of qualitative coding of our field notes and interview transcripts as well as multimodal microanalysis of students' digital poems.

A substantial body of research has identified five core features of effective professional development, including a content area focus, opportunities for hands-on and active learning, coherence with previous professional experiences, involvement with colleagues from the same school or subject area, and a substantial duration of contact hours throughout the school year (Desimone, 2009; Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon & Birman, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Our approach to professional development embodied these features and provided us with a framework to design and evaluate a specific unit within our English curriculum. Over the course of three years, we analyzed our data, adapted our approach to digital poetry, and engaged in critical reflection.

Communities of practice illustrate the role of situated cognition in educators' daily lives. In effect, our collaboration served as a community of practice that allowed us to gain key insights into the relationship between technology and pedagogy. At the start of our collaboration, I functioned as a content expert and Lora served as a technology specialist. Our roles were very defined - and as we soon discovered, very limiting. By the third year of our collaboration, I had gained rich technical knowledge and Lora had acquired a deep understanding of the English curriculum. Other teachers within the school soon began to see Lora in a new light. As a librarian, she was more than someone with expertise in print and digital material. She was a designer, an innovator, and a collaborator.

A GUIDE TO COLLABORATIVE PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

Stage One: Engaging in Critical Dialogue

A collaborative practitioner research project involves two or more members of the school community. It's important that all practitioner researchers are willing participants. Since this

kind of research involves educators asking critical questions and reflecting on their pedagogy, it demands a certain level of commitment. As a teacher, the idea of practitioner research was less intimidating to me because I had a colleague who worked and learned alongside me throughout the project. As a teacher educator today, I have found that it is almost always best to begin with those who are open to change and willing to take risks. Very often, their colleagues will first engage in legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as they learn about practitioner research and see its impact on pedagogy and policy. Over time, they understand the value of practitioner research and its relevance to their professional development.

If a classroom teacher and a school librarian decide to collaborate on a research project related to technology, they may elect to engage in critical dialogue through a back mapping process (Curwood, 2011). Rather than starting with a specific digital tool or a certain unit of study, they take a step back and consider the overarching aims of the curriculum and their role as educators. This process focuses on the ends question, which Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) argue is the purpose of practitioner research.

A back mapping process related to the role of technology in the curriculum may consider the following questions:

- What do we want students to know and be able to do within the curriculum for this grade level and content area?
- What knowledge and skills do students possess in terms of technology?
- What knowledge and skills are students lacking in terms of technology?
- What do we, as teachers, need to do to support student learning outcomes?
- How can technology shape students' engagement with the curriculum?
- How can technology shape students' engagement with each other?

- How can technology promote student achievement in the classroom?

The back mapping process, as Lora and I found in our project, often leads to a rich discussion and generates multiple possibilities for practitioner research. As such, it can help to frame the research question and focus the research project.

Stage Two: Planning the Research Project

If a teacher and a librarian are working together on a collaborative research project, they will find that their critical discussions help to guide them toward a research question. The next step is to narrow the focus of the project. In our research, Lora and I realized that our efforts to redesign the poetry unit within the sophomore curriculum would provide an ideal opportunity to look closely at our pedagogy. As educators work to implement new units of study, standards, and assessments, they can collaborate with colleagues to critically consider how technology shapes student learning. After determining the focus of the project, classroom teachers and librarians can then work together to craft the research question.

Following Hubbard and Power's (2003) recommendation, ask questions that begin with *how* or *what*. In terms of technology integration, this may include questions such as: How do students use digital storytelling in order to foster their knowledge of voice and audience? What digital tools promote small group collaboration within a research project? How can social networks extend classroom learning? At the core of each of these questions is the teacher's role in designing learning opportunities. Consequently, collaborative practitioner research allows educators to look inward at their own practice and outward at their students' learning.

Once researchers have formulated a question, they must then consider what data are relevant. In order to consider their own practices, they may

elect to write journal entries, take notes, record their instruction, or observe each other. This data can be complemented with student artifacts, such as written work, digital work, reflections, self-assessments, as well as informal or formal interviews with students. Within the planning phase, it can also be helpful to conduct a literature review. Given our focus on literacy and technology, Lora and I reviewed relevant journals, such as the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. As new practitioner researchers, this helped to us to situate our work within the field and to consider what methods we could use to answer our research questions.

Stage Three: Collecting and Analyzing Data

Cole and Knowles (2000) argue that teaching *is* inquiry. On a daily basis, teachers observe student learning, gather and interpret data, and engage in reflection. Practitioner research is a natural progression of this work and offers a more formalized approach to understanding teaching and learning. In order to analyze our own practice, Lora and I took field notes during and after our instruction and curriculum design. Most collaborative practitioner research projects will involve some form of note taking, such as observational notes or journal entries.

Corsaro (1981) suggests that notes often fall into four categories: 1) Field notes are direct observations of classroom events, 2) Methodological notes relate to the research methods, 3) Theoretical notes consider how the research informs, and is informed by, theory, and 4) Personal notes refer to events in the life of educators or students that affect classroom events. For practitioner researchers, it can be helpful to review their notes and use these as codes to generate further questions and offer emergent findings.

In order to examine student learning within the iPoetry unit, Lora and I conducted informal interviews with all students and multiple semi-

structured interviews with focal students. These interviews provided us with insight into how students conceptualized literacy, multimodality, and technology. We collected artifacts, such as handouts and rubrics, which allowed us to trace how our design and assessment evolved over time. To understand students' design process, we also collected their digital poems. One of the challenges of research is to collect relevant data. As Wolcott states, "The answers to my best questions do not lie solely in the accumulation of data" (p. 72). Once a teacher and librarian have worked together to collect data, the next step is to conduct analysis.

During the iPoetry project, Lora and I used thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) to analyze our notes, artifacts, and interview transcripts. Later, we applied multimodal microanalysis to several digital poems in order to understand how students' modal choices shaped their composition process. By drawing on diverse forms of data and using multiple approaches to data analysis, we were able to gain insight into the process of designing, implementing, and assessing a digital poetry curriculum.

Stage Four: Reflecting on the Process

Collaborative practitioner research begins with critical discussion and continues with thoughtful reflection. Technology integration is not a simple process, and reflection can shed light on the relationship between technology and pedagogy. Educators may consider:

- How did our creation, assessment, and implementation of this lesson shape student learning?
- How can we reiterate this lesson in the future in order to meet targeted learning outcomes?
- What counts as successful learning with digital tools?

- How can we identify successful collaboration in online spaces?
- How do student-created artifacts offer evidence of their engagement and achievement?

At each stage of the research process, it is important to return to the original research questions and data sources. As teachers and librarians reflect on their collaborative project and critically consider the role of technology in schools, they may find that attention to student work helps to frame their reflection. Reflection, in turn, directly informs action.

Practitioner research offers an evidence-based framework for librarians and teachers to collaborate. It challenges educators to question their assumptions, investigate their practices, and engage in reflective dialogue. The four stages of practitioner research are often iterative, rather than linear. I argue that collaborative practitioner research is grounded in the theory of situated cognition. Rather than understanding educators' intelligence to solely rest in their heads, situated cognition values the social, cultural, and physical contexts in which educators live and work. The stages of practitioner research capitalize on educators' local knowledge and interpersonal connections.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Collaborative Instructional Design in Library and Teacher Partnerships critically considers the relationship between school librarians and classroom teachers. In a digital age, it is imperative that we rethink our roles as educators, our design of learning environments, and our use of tools. Technology alone does not change schools. Rather, the ways in which technology is implemented into the curriculum can serve to promote

a student-centered and inquiry-based learning environment. Moving forward, it is essential that educators share their knowledge within the wider educational community.

Future practitioner research can offer accounts of best practices with technology and provide examples of collaborative professional development. Educators can ask: How does the design of physical spaces, such as the library, shape student learning? What online spaces promote collaboration and communication? How do the Common Core standards support technology integration across the curriculum? How can we foster students' online reading skills and multimodal writing skills? The power of practitioner research is that such questions emerge from local contexts, yet their answers can inform our collective understanding of teaching and learning.

CONCLUSION

Practitioner research provides an ideal opportunity for school librarians and classroom teachers to engage in sustained collaboration in order to effectively implement educational reforms, including those related to technology integration. In addition, practitioner research offers a framework for professional development and school improvement. Wenger (1998) challenges the notion of learning as an individual, skill-based experience and asks: "What if we adopted a different perspective, one that placed learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world?... What if... we assumed that learning is, in its essence, a fundamentally social phenomenon, reflecting our own deeply social nature as human beings capable of knowing? What kind of understanding would such a perspective yield on how learning takes place and on what is required to support it? (p. 3)"

This calls into question traditional models of professional development that focus on isolated

skills or tools, which function to deprive individuals of agency and discount the importance of situated cognition.

In this chapter, I have drawn on a three-year study on digital poetry in order to explicate a framework for collaborative practitioner research. As a classroom teacher, the iPoetry project offered me a research-based perspective on technology integration. Lora, as a librarian, gained content expertise and social capital within the school. Through the process of data collection and analysis, we both gained insight into multimodal composition and curriculum design. As we reflected on our research, we came to value each other's ideas and insights. Far too often, educators do not have the time or space to truly engage with each other. Practitioner research offers an invaluable opportunity for teachers and librarians to ask compelling questions – and find out unexpected answers.

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From Collaboration to Transformation

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Communities of Practice: A group of professionals who share a common interest and engage in dialogue in order to gain knowledge related to their field.

Digital Literacy: The ability to use digital tools to locate, evaluate, and synthesize information; to communicate and collaborate with others; to create and innovate within multiple modes and mediums.

Situated Cognition: Knowledge is inherently situated in social, cultural, and physical contexts.

KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Collaborative Practitioner Research: Educators who collaboratively, critically, and reflectively conduct research in their local contexts.