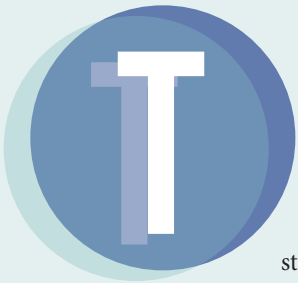


# Seeing Anew

## An Invitation to Teacher Research

By Thomas Newkirk



The year is 1939. A twenty-four-year-old science teacher at the Tiffin (Ohio) Junior Home, an orphanage, is tending his last-period study hall—in which no studying is going on. As he describes it: “I assigned the lessons and saw to it that students looked at their books, but I didn’t turn their pages and neither did they.”

This teacher knows the scene well: he is an orphan himself and had spent almost his entire life at the Junior Home, beginning at age six after his father was killed in a tornado. He graduated (second in his class) and later he worked there as a janitor to help pay his way through Heidelberg College.


He decides to do something about this study hall. He brings all of his books into the classroom to create a classroom library (remember, this was before there was such a thing as a paperback). He borrows others from friends and fellow teachers. Among them are *Of Mice and Men*, which had been recently published—and improbably James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which was banned in the United States until a 1933 district court ruling. There are also more accessible choices: Pearl Buck, Booth Tarkington, the Tom Swift series, Jack London, and Zane Gray.

The teacher wants to see if he could engage these students in self-chosen reading, and if he could, determine which of his books would be chosen. He calls this method “free reading.” He introduces the books to the students, and over the course of the year monitors the reading choices. His students carefully avoid the established and longer classics (Dickens, Thackeray, Tolstoy, Thoreau) and choose *Of Mice and Men*, *The Call of the Wild*, *White Fang*, James Hilton’s *Goodbye Mr. Chips*, and Edward Eggleston’s *The Hoosier Schoolboy*. On average, students read 6.5 books that year (not bad for twenty-five minutes a day), and for many it was the first time they had ever read a book of their own choice.

He publishes his results in the state National Education Association journal *Ohio Schools*, an account that finishes with a flourish: “Regardless of the reading level that students may be expected to attain, the chances are poor that they’ll ever read outside of school unless they can be induced to read of their own free will.”

That man, my father.

I am sure the term *teacher research* was nonexistent at the time, but that is what he was about. His account traces the arc of inquiry (Dewey 1910). He begins with a felt problem, the wasting of time in the study hall. He devises an intervention, and then monitors the effect of the change. If this sounds like a version of what teachers



**“We believe that teachers are researchers and that instructional decisions are best when based on what teachers have learned and documented by observing and listening carefully to students throughout the day.”**

–**Belief Statement 1** (Teachers as researchers)  
from *The Teacher You Want to Be: Essays about Children, Learning, and Teaching*,  
featuring author Thomas Newkirk

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do all the time—well, it is. The school day is filled with acts of inquiry—microtheories about student performance, adjustments, and checks to see if the changes make a difference. It's what John Dewey called "intelligence." Teacher research is a slightly more formalized version of this inquiry arc.

Of course, the very term *research* can seem imposing and intimidating. It suggests objectivity, expertise, conclusiveness, scope, and statistics. We can imagine that "Research" produces "Truth" where the best that we can do is produce a lowercase "truth"—something that helps us understand our own classroom (and ourselves) better but may not generalize to other classes (or even to all our classes). It feels more transitory, fragile, amateur. But these insights are also vital and useful—they speak to our specific situations in a way that more formal research can't. They open us up to possibilities, and pull us out of routines.

There is another mental trap that needs to be named. It is easy to talk yourself out of an inquiry by claiming your method or intervention is not "original"—it has been described or tried before, by Nancie Atwell, or Peter Johnston, or Donald Murray. It's been done before. But it hasn't been done in your context, by you, with your students, your school, at this point in educational history.

It's actually hard to just copy. Even if we try to reproduce a sentence or quote for a paper, we invariably change it. Copy editors nail me on this every time. Whatever approach you are employing, you are adapting it, giving it your personal stamp. I'm not even sure that there are truly original ideas, or what one would look like (hideous, I think). My advisor at the University of Texas once said to me in a moment of candor, "My original ideas are those for which I've forgotten the source."

## **Look at the Fish!—The Importance of Thinking Small**

In the late 1800s, the famous biologist Louis Agassiz would begin his anatomy classes with the requirements that his students observe a fish—for three full days. Students typically began with some interest, became dreadfully bored, and gradually came to see new things and regained their interest.

I have always thought this is the cycle of true research: to take something you think you "know"—and through sustained attention, begin to see it anew. The long-standing goal of qualitative research is to make the familiar strange. In the hectic world of the classroom, we rarely have time to pay attention in this way—but by identifying small, manageable points of inquiry, we can learn from our practice.

*Here are some brief ideas for getting started:*

- 1. Ask a good question.** Here would be some I would suggest.
  - a. How do my responses promote good student talk in my writing/reading conferences (i.e., do I know how to stop talking)?**
  - b. How would I define ways in which my students develop as writers?**
  - c. How would student writers/readers describe their growth?**
  - d. How do young students mix drawing and writing?**
  - e. How do students incorporate popular cultural references or genres in their writing?**
  - f. What comprehension and word attack strategies does a struggling reader use?**
  - g. Is there any pattern to the voluntary book choices students make? (My dad's question!)**
- 2. Gather a small and manageable set of data.** This could be a few interviews, some transcripts, some selections from a portfolio of student writing, or some videotaped classroom episodes. **It's often better to do more with less—don't drown in data. Perhaps focus on one or two students.**
- 3. Look at the fish. Read and reread. What emerged? What surprises you? Don't settle for first impressions.**
- 4. Be willing to change your question.** As you explore, you may find more interesting problems to look at. **Remember the classic recipe for cooking sturgeon: place on wooden board, cook two days on low heat, throw away the sturgeon, and eat the board.**
- 5. Share with colleagues—this doesn't have to be a grand presentation. Look at the fish together. Actual student work, I am convinced, is endlessly informative. You may want to go on to bigger things, for example, a conference talk or even an article, but start small. (The best guide available for teacher research is *The Art of Classroom Inquiry: A Handbook for Teacher-Researchers* by Ruth Shagoury Hubbard and Brenda Power.)**

## Why Do Teacher Research?

The answer to this question might seem obvious—to create knowledge, even if it is local knowledge geared to a specific group of students. Or to help us become more effective teachers. All true. But there is a more basic reason—to keep ourselves alive, and alert, and happy as teachers. To be learners. We become depressed when we find ourselves (or imagine ourselves) in closed systems, where all decisions are laid out for us, where we have the infamous pacing guides, the common assessments, the administrator wanting everyone “on the same page.” I am using *depressed* in a clinical, not just metaphoric sense: studies have shown (in rats, monkeys, and humans) that when we lose a sense of agency, or freedom to make choices or affect our future, we can easily sink into depression or sadness.

If we are honest with ourselves, it is not always external forces that inhibit us. We all can be victims of our own inertia, when we feel passive and mediocre and tired—so that even the thought of making a change and investigating it feels like too much effort. We are in a rut, we are settling, we are not the teacher we want to be. At moments like this, the action of research is not an additional burden; it is the way up and out.

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The best antidote to sadness is learning. In T. H. White’s *The Once and Future King*, Merlyn has this advice for a despondent Arthur:

**“The best thing for being sad,” replied Merlyn, beginning to puff and blow, “is to learn something. That’s the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then—to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the only thing for you. (1939, 185–86)**

It is the thing for all of us.

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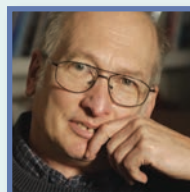
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Tom’s most recent book is *Minds Made for Stories: How We Really Read and Write Informational and Persuasive Texts*. His *Misreading Masculinity* was cited by *Instructor Magazine* as one of the most significant books for teachers in that decade. Tom also wrote the books *Holding On to Good Ideas in a Time of Bad Ones* and *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*, which won NCTE’s David H. Russell Award for Research. Other recent titles from Tom include *Children Want to Write* (coauthored with Penny Kittle) and *The Art of Slow Reading*.

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