"The Art of Classroom Inquiry: A Handbook for Teacher-Researchers"
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Introduction

If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?
—Albert Einstein

Teachers throughout the world are developing professionally by becoming teacher-researchers, a wonderful new breed of artists-in-residence. Using our own classrooms as laboratories and our students as collaborators, we are changing the way we work with students as we look at our classrooms systematically through research.

Over the past twenty years, a wealth of materials has been published about teacher research. Teachers have presented their findings in major journals and argued eloquently about the value of teacher research; however, most of these accounts lack specific information about how teachers become researchers. This book evolved from our work with hundreds of teacher-researchers as we explored the research craft. We struggled together to figure out the kinds of interviews that work best in different research studies; how to collect data in the midst of wholehearted teaching; and how to cull information from hundreds of pages of material for a brief, publishable article. This handbook describes the process of doing classroom research and provides many effective research techniques.

If you are already aware of the power of teacher research, this handbook may help you begin to see yourself as a teacher-researcher. But we hope it will do more than that. We hope the techniques and research activities that follow will enlist you as a member of the growing worldwide network of teacher-researchers.
Although many of us have been conducting informal classroom research as part of our teaching for years, we often do not think of ourselves as researchers. Julie Ford shares her changing notions of the definition of researcher:

When I think of research, I think of the big R type with long hours in the library, notes that could fill a novel, and a bibliography several pages long. I think of tension and stress lurking in the shadows. Feeling as I do about Research, the thought of conducting it in my classroom didn’t curl my toes. But as I read the research [relating to classroom-based research], I felt as though a door was beginning to open. My definition of research took a turn, and that familiar twinge of anxiety didn’t come rushing forward.

I began to think of “wonderings” I had regarding my students and my teaching. I pondered ways of pursuing these wonderings, feeling I was capable of doing some groundwork studies. I could look at my own initial research, related to my own very familiar environment. I didn’t need to read for hours about studies conducted by Researchers elsewhere and then connect the findings to my room. My students and I could participate together, learning about our own classroom.

When Julie and other teachers like us read the research accounts of our fellow teachers, we realize that our wonderings are worth pursuing. By becoming researchers, we hope to find strategies to develop more principled classroom practice. But where to begin? And how to get past the internal critics who lurk in the back of our minds repeating, “Who are we to assume we have the ability to become researchers or to answer our own questions about teaching through research?”

Our answer is a resounding, “Who better to do this?” We teacher-researchers bring to our work an important element that outside researchers lack—a sense of place, a sense of history in the schools in which we work. Because of our presence over time at our research sites, we teachers bring a depth of awareness to our data that outside researchers cannot begin to match. We know our schools, our students, our colleagues, and our learning agendas. Our research is grounded in this rich resource base.

And while we expect our research to move us to a better understanding of our students and to better practice, we don’t expect the research to shift the ground beneath us. Glenda Bissex (1996), one of the founders of the modern teacher-research movement, remembers vividly how disappointed some teacher-researchers were when she met with them about their findings at the
time they first considered what they had learned from teacher research. It was only after continued reflection that they saw the full impact on their professional lives:

I remember getting together with my first group of Case Study students—teachers who were doing research in their own classrooms—at the end of winter, after they'd been gathering data for months. As we went around the table where we sat and each spoke, there was an accumulating disappointment that they had not arrived at any monumental conclusions and a relief to find that others had the same experience. . . . I don’t know that any of the dozens of teacher-researchers I’ve worked with have felt they came up with earth-shattering conclusions. I also can’t think of one who felt that she or he hadn’t learned something from doing the study. If they learned less than they sought to learn, they also learned more; for they learned how to observe; they learned “why” they were teaching the way they were; they learned to reinterpret some events through seeing them from their students’ points of view; and they learned, among other things, that they could trust their own powers of learning. (182–83)

As teacher-researcher Peggy Groves reflects: “The difference between my recent classroom research and my usual classroom practices is that for my research I kept notes about what I did, I looked more closely at what happened, I asked myself harder questions, and I wrote about it all. These differences took a lot of time, but I think I’m a better teacher for it. And maybe even a better writer.”

We began collecting materials for this book almost twenty years ago, when we realized there were far more research findings published than accounts of the process of becoming a teacher-researcher. For example, when we read an account of a teacher-researcher successfully analyzing her reading group procedures, we may find it hard to imagine her as a beginning researcher. The fluid narrative may include some awkward questions about her teaching practices, but it rarely includes questions about research methods. The novice researcher may have little sense of how the teacher-researcher got from there to here—from the struggle to find and frame a research question to a clear and thoughtful presentation of her findings.

In our work as teacher-researchers, we have learned that this struggle is a natural one. You will see the line between teaching and research blur often as you read many examples of teachers doing research in this handbook because
teaching and research have many of the same skills at their core. Some of these skills were described by Charles Kettering in writing about research:

Research is a high-hat word that scares a lot of people. It needn’t. It’s rather simple. Essentially research is nothing but a state of mind . . . a friendly, welcoming attitude toward change . . . going out to look for change instead of waiting for it to come.

Research is an effort to do things better and not to be caught asleep at the switch. It is the problem-solving mind as contrasted with the let-well-enough-alone mind. It is the tomorrow mind instead of the yesterday mind. (Kettering, in Boyd 1961, 82)

If you have a problem-solving mind as a teacher, you are ready for research. If you welcome change and growth with your students, research can have a place in your professional life. The educational world is certainly in need of the tomorrow minds of teacher-researchers!

This is particularly true with the growing diversity in today’s schools. At a recent education convention, noted educational activist Lisa Delpit was asked how it is possible to prepare teachers for the wide range of cultures, abilities, and talents that they will meet in any given classroom. She listed three key ingredients: The first is to be humble and recognize that you have much to learn from your students and their communities. Second, approach your teaching always with a sense of inquiry, framing questions about your students and their needs to guide your teaching. Finally, have a willingness to share your story. Other teachers need to know what you have learned and how you have gained your wisdom.

These three ingredients are the basis of teacher research. We approach our classrooms with humility and a sense of inquiry and wonder—and we make a commitment to add our wisdom to a knowledge base that educates others about the realities of teaching and learning. Teacher-researcher Tim Gillespie (2000) claims that our teaching narratives have become increasingly important:

We need to tell our stories, because true classroom narratives offer an important alternative to other prevalent modes of discourse about school life. There are competing narratives out there about this profession of ours that are dangerous, and classroom stories resist and complicate them. (2)
Debates about the changing roles of teachers and the value of their research persist. The teacher-as-researcher movement is not without controversy. Those of us who believe in the power of teacher research have been constrained by conservative definitions of university researchers and federal policymakers. These debates are entirely predictable, if only because universities and public schools still have different beliefs when ascribing value to research, as Michael Patton (2002) notes:

Debates about the meaningfulness, rigor, significance, and relevance of various approaches to research are the regular features of university life. On the whole, within universities and among scholars, the status hierarchy in science attributes the highest status to basic research . . . and virtually no status to formative and action research. The status hierarchy is reversed in real-world settings, where people with problems attribute the greatest significance to action and formative research that can help them solve their problems in a timely way. (223)

Teachers and many researchers who work in university settings will probably never fully agree on the value of different types of research. Ongoing debates about the value of teacher research remind us of an anecdote about Picasso:

A story is told of a French railroad passenger who, upon learning that his neighbor on the next seat was Picasso, began to grouse and grumble about modern art, saying that it was not a faithful representation of reality. Picasso demanded to know what was a faithful representation of reality. The man produced a wallet-sized photo and said, "There! That's a real picture—that's what my wife really looks like." Picasso looked at it carefully from several angles, turning it up and down and sideways, and said, "She's awfully small. And flat." (Nachmanovitch 1990, 118)

Like Picasso, teacher-researchers are heading a revolution in modern art—the modern art of teaching. We are looking at research possibilities from new angles. We are redefining our roles, rejecting the small and flat impoverished models of research that attempt to "turn classroom inquiry into a pseudo-scientific horserace" (Atwell 1991).

We are also declaring the work of fellow teacher-researchers as invaluable, regardless of the value other researchers and policymakers may place on it.
Teacher-researcher Jane Doan writes about case studies, arguing passionately for trusting our values as teacher-researchers:

The need to prove that case studies are valid in the scientific community stems from teachers' basic insecurities. We are forever trying to prove ourselves. Why can't we believe in ourselves enough to say that case studies are the way to do educational research? No explaining, no defending of ourselves, no worrying about accountability! Just, this is what we are doing. This is who we are.

This new stance is compatible not only with our vision of research but also with a vision of what teachers can be. This vision is not of passive teachers who perpetuate the system as it is, but of teachers who see how the system can be changed through their research.

"The growing awareness of the political 'stuff' that is inherent to teacher research is probably what stuck with me the most," reflects Gail Parson when she tells about her experience at a teacher-research institute. "I remember Mary Kay, sitting forward in her seat, jabbing at the air with one finger like she does, and saying with that enigmatic half-smile, 'It's a whole different thing to go to a school board or a curriculum committee and say, Based on my research... "

We think that once you embark on the challenge that is teacher research, you will be hooked. As Gail notes:

Somebody had to stick her neck out and try it... and we did. It makes me appreciate what's happening now even more. The study I did... remains a huge pile of "stuff"—the compost for one rough article, and a source of more and more questions I have about how adolescents think and process information and make meaning for themselves. I showed the suitcase full of [copies of] journals, audiotapes, and field notes to a professor friend who said, "You did this as a working teacher?!!!" Damn straight, sez I. Want to meet a few of my "working teacher" friends? Wait till you see what they're up to!

We invite you to meet some of our working teacher friends and enter into the growing community of teachers who are testing the limits of educational research. Wait until you see what we're up to!

Research, like teaching, is a complicated and messy process. You cannot divide the process into neat linear steps, no matter how hard you try. We had some trouble constructing this text about the process of doing research, and it may help you to see some of the bones that are sticking out in this skeleton.
Books are linear, but the research process is not. As researchers, we do not necessarily start with a question and then move through data-collection procedures and designs to our findings and publication in a lockstep fashion. Nor do we wait to analyze data until all our data are collected; we are analyzing, writing, and reflecting right from the beginning. We urge you to use this book in the ways that will most benefit your own process. You may want to skip around; how you read this book should be based on where you are in your development as a teacher-researcher.

For example, if you have problems with writing, start with one of the last chapters, "Perishable Art: Writing Up Research." You will not be able to write down research notes or construct brief memos if you must first overcome an aversion to writing. In the same way, understanding data collection or research design will be difficult without a sense of the whole—how collection, analysis, and design can fit into your life as a classroom teacher.

We start with stories of beginning teacher-researchers and their struggles in "Try to Love the Questions Themselves: Finding and Framing a Research Question." This chapter takes you through the initial stages of deciding what to investigate in the classroom and how to frame the question so that information can be gathered effectively. Chapter 1 closes with some suggestions for getting started.

Chapter 2, "Form and Function: The Research Design," discusses the importance of designing the research to fit the area of investigation. You will read the stories of four teacher-researchers making decisions and solving problems as they refine their research designs.

In Chapter 3, "The Artist's Toolbox: Strategies for Data Collection," we detail the many ways to gather data in the midst of teaching. We share examples of the various ways that teachers log their data through field notes and teaching journals, as well as show strategies for collecting student samples, conducting interviews, and using the electronic media of videotaping and audiotaping to gather information.

Next, Chapter 4, "Pentimento: Strategies for Data Analysis," demystifies the process of making sense of that mountain of data. We present strategies for preparing data for analysis, narrowing the focus, isolating the important findings, and fleshing out the final categories.

In Chapter 5, "The Legacy of Distant Teachers: Creative Review of Literature," we discuss the implications of others' research on your findings. This chapter purposely follows data analysis, since a careful review of literature is most helpful after categories are defined.
Chapter 6, "Perishable Art: Writing Up Research," takes you through the process of converting research into words for sharing with a wider audience. We suggest writing exercises and resources as well as a wide variety of outlets for published work. (These resources are extended in Appendix E.)

We discuss the importance of creating a teacher-research network and support group in the final chapter, "You Are Not Alone: Finding Support for Your Research." You will read tips from successful teacher-organizers for starting and maintaining these groups. We suggest strategies for writing proposals to fund research as well as smaller grants to fund classroom projects. Successful proposals and grants are included along with ideas for sources of funding.

There are several journals and websites that can aid teacher-researchers. We list these in Appendix E, "Resources for Publication."

We hope you enjoy the stories and research techniques of the teacher-researchers that follow as much as we enjoyed compiling them.
The Dunne-Za, a branch of the Athabaskan tribe, say that a person who speaks from the authority of his or her own experience "little bit know something." Knowledge, the elders say, empowers a person to live in this world with intelligence and understanding (Ridington 1990). Dunne-Za men and women expect their children to gain power by observing the animals and natural forces around them through a series of quests called vision quests. Every person "knows something" from these experiences and from the stories that emerge from the quests.

The goals of teacher-researchers, like those of the Dunne-Za on vision quests, is to "little bit know something" about their students' abilities and learning strategies. New knowledge not only better enables teachers to understand students and their world but also empowers the learners themselves.

Teacher-researchers at all grade levels—from kindergarten to graduate level—are increasingly turning to qualitative or ethnographic research methods. Observational studies help the teacher understand the student's world from the student's point of view rather than from that of the teacher's own culture. Students are the informants in teacher research, helping us to learn both the recipes for behavior in their cultures and the learning strategies that they employ. And central to the role of informants is being an active collaborator in these research endeavors.
Teachers just beginning their own classroom research often feel overwhelmed; there is so much to study in their classrooms that they wonder how other teachers have known how to start. As Glenda Bissex writes, “A teacher-researcher may start out not with a hypothesis to test, but with a wondering to pursue” (1987, 3). All teachers have wonderings worth pursuing. Transforming wonderings into questions is the start of teacher research.

Finding the Question

Nothing shapes our research as much as the questions we ask. In the last few years, more teachers are investigating our own classrooms and with our own students, recognizing that finding and asking those questions are a natural—and vital—part of the way that we make sense of the teaching and learning in our classrooms.

In qualitative research, the questions come from real-world observations and dilemmas. Here are some examples of the wonderings that teacher-researchers we know are pursuing:

- How do my students’ questions change after participating in science talks?
- How do students in my multi-age classroom develop spelling strategies?
- What happens when my students attempt peer mentoring?
- What is the range of participation among the boys in my class during reading workshop?
- What happens when my students independently solve math problems?
- What happens when middle school students with autism are given the opportunity to socialize with one another two to three times a week in a socialization lab?
- How do students communicate their mathematical thinking during whole-group discussions?
- How does a writing workshop affect students’ sense of social responsibility in a second language class?
- What procedures or activities promote or encourage students to revise their writing?
- What problems does a preservice teacher solve as she begins to teach without her mentor teacher?
- What happens when eighth graders choose their own reading material in a reading workshop situation?
What language occurs in mathematics learning and what role does it play?
How do children resolve problems on their own in their improvisational dramatic play?
How do teachers of writing change their instruction after participating in a writing institute?
How do students evaluate the reading and writing of peers?

The questions these teachers chose to pursue arose out of their classroom concerns; they were important questions for their teaching.

Kathleen Reilly (1995), a high school English teacher, recalls the moment she began to frame the question that led to her changes in practice:

I think I know when it happened. . . . I was in conference with Matthew, and he said the usual, "I can't write for you; you're too serious." Right then, part of me imagined what it would be like if I were not the only one to read and think about his writing. Teacher-researchers pay attention to the "what-ifs" that occur, and I have learned to let myself push a simple question like this to the end of the thought: What if I were not the only one to read and think about Matthew's writing? I wanted his energies directed to growth, not to figuring me out. What if I could show Matthew that what I see in his writing is not restricted to just my view? What if other readers made comments? Where are the other readers who can help convince Matthew that his writer's voice is strong, but he may have relied too much on humor and not enough on substance? At seventeen, he was certain that the only way to succeed was to psyche out the teacher. I had a hunch student writing could change if I were not the only reader. (50)

Because of this hunch, Kathleen spent a year investigating what happened when the principal, peers, and parents of her students became collaborators in assessment. She describes the year that she was involved in this research as the best year she'd had in a long time "because I saw the way my students responded to the attention, support, and gentle prodding of other readers" (Reilly 1995, 51).

First-grade teacher Christina Randall also used her writing to focus on concerns about her interactions with students. But her observations led to much different questions:

Going to lunch is one of the many hassles faced with youngsters in a portable classroom. We need at least fifteen minutes to wash hands, put on outer gear, and
clean our room. Usually we are keeping some other class waiting. Last week the procedure was much the same. On our way into the main building they spy it. The line stops. “What’s that?” “Is that a starfish?” “What’s that starfish doing on top of the clam?” “Lookit! I just saw that clam thing open its shell.” Questions are being asked faster than can possibly be answered. We are all fascinated with the saltwater aquarium. I reluctantly pull myself back from the tank with a “Let’s go, gang. We can come back later to look at the aquarium.” The questions continued after lunch and throughout the rest of the day. Within days the aquarium begins to show up in writing.

In creating a language-rich environment for young children, I have capitalized on the interest in the saltwater aquarium. We wrote a group story, went to research materials, and returned to the main building with observation logs in hand. Teachable moment? As a teacher in search of stimulating topics, I could hardly pass it up.


Buzzwords suggest that the transition be made from focusing on how the child succeeds with the curriculum to how the curriculum succeeds with the child.

But is success determined by the products of tests or the processes observed and documented? If the curriculum is rich and diverse in language-building activities, what about remedial services like speech and language therapy? Do children need to be pulled out for remedial services to work on specific skills?

Like Christina, many teachers have to do some wandering to get to their wonderings. Often questions for research start with a feeling of tension. Christina wants to look beyond faddish buzzwords and rapid implementation of new teaching methods to try to figure out what is really going on with language development in her students and what this means for the systems of intervention established in schools. Kathleen wants to understand how to help her students move beyond writing to please her. This involved working with others beyond the walls of her classroom and letting go of her control as her students’ only audience.

It is not surprising that the root word of question is quest. Teacher-researchers embark on a new kind of vision quest as they look for research topics in their classrooms. They want questions to research that can lead to a new vision of themselves as teachers and of their students as learners. These questions often involve seeing students in new ways.
Jack Campbell, a teacher-researcher from Fairbanks, Alaska, realized he needed to take a closer look at his students and their culture if he wanted to help them become better writers.

This past year, I've watched Native writers become confused because of the way their writing has been edited. When they receive feedback, either from their response groups . . . or from me, sometimes they lose confidence because they take the criticism "personal." When these criticisms occur in their experience-based writing . . . they seem to interpret their writing as being ineffective. When a novice writer offers an essay on his or her personal experiences, and these in turn are criticized, perhaps for legitimate technical reasons, their writing voices lose authority and direction. The critiques, without explanations, become forms of cultural tyrannies.

As Jack thought about changing his teaching to meet the needs of his students, he wanted to be able to document how these strategies affected his students. He crafted his teaching dilemma into the following question: How can Alaskan Native writers establish a stronger writing voice?

Elsa Bro found herself wondering about "how students choose protective spaces within the classroom." As an intern teacher with just one month in the classroom, she turned her musings into questions: "What happens when I ask these students to get into groups?" she wrote in her teaching journal. "What are the effects of doing seating assignments? How might 'changing places' literally and figuratively benefit them?"

Natalie Goldberg (1990) advises writers to be specific:

Not car, but Cadillac. Not fruit, but apple. Not bird, but wren. Not a codependent, neurotic man, but Harry, who runs to open the refrigerator for his wife, thinking she wants an apple, when she is headed for the gas stove to light her cigarette. . . . Get below the label and be specific to the person. (3)

Goldberg stresses that the best way to create a vivid and true picture with words is through specific, tangible, concrete images. The same can be said of a good teacher-research question.

All these teachers started with specific instances of tension in their classrooms—a lack of trust in conferences, an inability to get students to line up, hurt feelings when suggestions were made. As these teacher-researchers thought
about these tensions, they began to focus on larger issues of culture, learning, and school structure. The questions they asked were not aimed at quick-fix solutions to errors in classroom technique. Although asking these questions might help these teachers with their methods, the explorations have even greater implications. All involve understanding students and teaching in much deeper ways.

This attempt at new understanding often leads beyond the classroom door. Joan Merriam, a fourth-grade resource room teacher, was happy with the successes of her students; however, her case study of Charles started when she realized that everyone involved in Charles's schooling did not share her definition of success:

On Parent Conference night, Charles' entire family arrived in my room at the appointed time. Charles chose some poetry books and took his younger sister to the couch and read to her while I talked with his parents.

They had just come from a conference with Charles' classroom teacher, and concern was on their faces. Fourth grade is the first level in our school that assigns letter grades, so letters on the rank card were a new experience for them. Charles had received Cs in science, social studies, and spelling. Although his teacher had tried to assure them that C was average, they were not convinced. My glowing report of Charles' progress in reading and his grade of A did little to allay their fears. They were all too aware that The Boxcar Children in which Charles was reading so well was written at a third-grade reading level. While Charles' mom assured me that he was achieving success in my room, she was worried about what to her was a lack of success in the classroom. She asked me to predict when Charles would "catch up" to his peers and work at grade level. When he goes on to fifth grade, Charles will rotate among four teachers for classes. Both parents expressed concern that Charles might have difficulty "keeping up" with the rest of the class next year. While I did my best to reassure them that Charles was progressing, it was evident that they left the conference with some lingering doubts.

That conference left me with some doubts as well. Charles' parents and I had been operating at different levels. I was excited at how far Charles had come, while they were very worried about how far he had to go. When writing Charles' progress report, I had only considered his success during the one hour a day he worked in my room. I needed to look beyond my room for ways to help him succeed in his classroom and at home.

As a result of that conference, Joan established two research questions worth exploring: How could she help Charles attain a higher level of "success" in his
other classroom? How could she better communicate with his parents about his progress?

Joan was willing to look beyond the one hour Charles spent daily in her classroom to understand his needs. Jack’s research question would take him into Native American culture so that he could better understand what criticism meant to his students. The answers to these teachers’ research questions won’t necessarily validate their teaching practices. More likely, these teachers will discover that they need to change how they work with students and how they view young learners.

Kathleen, Christina, Jack, and Joan are unthreatened by change. They all could have easily developed questions through their observations from a defensive stance, a determination to maintain the classroom status quo. Kathleen could have asked, How can I make my students understand the importance of my conferences with them? Christina could have asked, How can I get students to spend more time on-task? Instead, the research questions, if answered, will probably result in changes in the teachers—not merely in their methods, but in their teaching philosophies and attitudes toward students.

Framing the Question

“One purpose of qualitative methods is to discover important questions, processes, and relationships, not to test them” (Marshall and Rossman 1989, 43). To keep the research process open to continual discovery, the framing of research questions is critical.

The first consideration while framing questions is to make sure the question is open-ended enough to allow possibilities the researcher hasn’t imagined to emerge. This rules out the kind of closed yes or no questions that are developed in experimental studies to test the differences between control and experimental groups.

Look again at some of the sample questions listed in the previous section, “Finding the Question.” What do you notice about them? The patterns that you see in your colleagues’ research questions can help you frame your own. You will notice that these questions are posed in a way that can be answered by descriptions and observations. The keywords are most often how or what, leaving the teacher-researcher open to describing the process and changes as they emerge. Framing the questions in this way helps make the research feasible for us as
teachers in the midst of our teaching; we are not tied to a rigid procedure that
may interfere with the flow of the classroom and with the changing needs of
students.

When posing your research question for the first time, come back to what
intrigues you in your classroom, what you wonder about. You might begin by
thinking about a particular student who you are not quite sure how to help.
What is working for her in the classroom and what is causing her problems?
Perhaps poetry seems to be the one avenue that is meaningful to her. What is
it about poetry that facilitates writing for her or other students? You might
frame a question that allows you to follow and describe the writing behaviors
of this student and others in the classroom in relation to the poetry that they
read, write, and hear.

You might instead want to investigate classwide teaching dilemmas that have
arisen, as Kathleen did in her question about expanding the audiences for her
student writers or as Jack did in his question about ways to help his native
Alaskan writers retain their voices in their writing. What are you puzzled by in
your classroom? Are there what-ifs running through your mind begging to be
explored? Teachers often need to rely on their intuitive hunches; trust these
hunches to guide you in the genesis of your research question. Remember that
research is a process "that religiously uses logical analysis as a critical tool in the
refinement of ideas, but which often begins at a very different place, where im-
agery, metaphor, and analogy, 'intuitive hunches,' kinesthetic feeling states, and
even dreams and dream-like states are prepotent" (Bargar and Duncan 1982, 3).

When you create your questions, build in enough time for observations to
take shape and even for the nature of the questions to shift in focus. The ques-
tions we pursue evolve and become richer when we allow our ideas and ob-
servations to incubate. Harry Matrype reflects on his own research experiences
and urges new researchers to give themselves the gift of time:

As a result of my experience I'm wondering, shouldn't the first year of a teacher-
researcher study be just doing observations—with the eye of the researcher—on
things going on in one's classroom? Then, after making these observations, a
teacher-researcher could identify an area to study during year two. I think my
original question is being considered too soon. What I should really be looking
at this year are the changes in topics that kids in my workshops experience over
the course of a semester or two. Kids invest themselves in learning to the degree
that their emotions allow them to. I realized a month or so into the school year
that I had put my eye on the cognitive sight before I had considered the emotional.

As far as discoveries related to my original question, while I may have set out in the beginning to check out the strategies kids develop when their instruction is less structured and directed, what I’ve really done is check out how well they can apply the procedures that I teach. The reality is that the choices my students have are much more limited than my original question implies. At this point, I’m less taken with the idea of trying to write on my original question than I am to write on some other area I’ve become more aware of. I feel good about the effort. I’m learning a great deal.

Teacher-researchers know that when it comes to research, the process needs to be as fulfilling as the final results. Finding and framing questions takes time and may involve lots of exploration through wonderings. But as Harry notes, much can be learned along the way. The benefits of teacher research begin with finding and enjoying the possibilities in your questions, not with analyzing research results. And the research cycle continues with new questions as well as possible answers.

**Suggestions for Getting Started**

1. Keep a teaching journal for at least one week, and preferably longer. Set aside some time at the start or end of the school day to write in this journal, reflecting on what you have noticed in the classroom. There is no specific format for this kind of writing; you may choose to keep a journal, a diary, or a record of observations. If keeping this kind of record is new to you, try timed practice writing for about ten minutes a day. Put your pen to paper and keep your hand moving, writing about the things that happened in your classroom. If you get stuck, write, “I remember in class today . . .” and just keep going. After several days of this kind of reflection, reread your journal entries and look for what surprises or intrigues you. See if there are some patterns in your concerns or delights that bear further inquiry.

2. Brainstorm a list of the things that you wonder about in your classroom. Write down at least ten things and don’t censor your list. Make an appointment
3. Be specific in your concerns. Many teachers reject their first questions or needlessly broaden them. They don’t always believe that their concerns are worthy of study. *What works well in writing workshops?* is a question we have been presented with more than once by teacher-researchers. This is a monumental question, too global for anyone to frame. But when we are presented with specific questions by teacher-researchers, such as *How are Julie’s perceptions of her role in writing response groups changing over time?*, the question is often followed with, “But I know that’s not important enough to study.” For too long, educational research has tried to answer big questions with short-term, large-scale questions that ignore the complexity of teacher and student interactions. Your research will probably start from a different point—individual students and their needs in your classroom. The more specific you are, the easier it will be to develop research procedures.

4. Once you have narrowed your area, write down your question, *considering it a first draft*. Don’t worry yet about how it is framed; just get it down on paper as a question. Write it as fully as you need to, as a whole paragraph if necessary. Give yourself permission to play with it, writing it in several different ways until you have all the information you want included in it. Now, read it again. Does it still intrigue you? Are you still itching to investigate this area? If the answer is no, look over your process and see where you lost your enthusiasm. Make sure you get that aspect back into your draft before you move on to the refining stage.

5. When you are ready to focus your question, look back over the sample questions in this chapter. Try beginning yours in the same way: “What is the role of...?” “How do...?” “What procedures...?” “What happens when...?” You may find that you need to make adjustments for your own particular question, but these stems are often a good first step.
6. Our final advice is the most important: Give yourself the time you need and the permission to modify your question as you continue your investigation. Carry poet Rainer Maria Rilke's advice with you as you begin your endeavor: "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves" (1934, 14).