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978-0-521-01313-0 - Teachers' Narrative Inquiry as Professional Development

Karen E. Johnson and Paula R. Golombek

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# Teachers' Narrative Inquiry as Professional Development

*Karen E. Johnson*

The Pennsylvania State University

*Paula R. Golombek*

The Pennsylvania State University



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To Glenn and Elizabeth

To Michael, Alex, and Anya



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## *Series editor's preface*

Engaging teachers and teachers-in-training in classroom research is now a well-recognized component of teacher development programs, as evidenced by a growing literature on journal writing, case studies, reflective teaching, action research, and other initiatives in which teachers develop “insider” accounts of teaching. Such activities focus on the thinking that teachers employ as the basis for their teaching and decision making, how they frame and problematize issues, and the ways in which they draw on experience, beliefs, and theory in teaching. This book expands what we know about teacher inquiry by describing the philosophy, procedures, and potentials of a less familiar form of teacher inquiry – the use of teachers’ narratives – in which teachers write about significant teaching episodes and experiences and, through the process of writing, gain a deeper understanding of the issues they describe as well as of themselves as teachers. Rather than depending on outside sources, narrative inquiry makes use of teacher stories as a source of knowing and as a way of bringing about changes both in themselves and in their teaching practices.

Teacher narratives are similar to case reports. Like case reports, they are a particularly useful form of teacher research because they are relatively easy to obtain and yet can provide a rich source of teacher-generated information that is of great interest both to the teacher-narrator and to others interested in how teachers conduct their practice, the thinking and problem solving they employ, and the sources they draw on in their daily practice. The teacher narratives in this book thus show the following:

- The nature of teacher narratives
- How different forms of teacher research take place
- How teachers theorize their classroom inquiries
- How the professional and theoretical knowledge teachers obtain from academic courses is used in their professional lives
- How teachers struggle to create lessons and courses that reflect their ideals, philosophies, and understandings
- How narrative inquiry can empower teachers

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- How narrative inquiry can become a powerful tool in language teacher education
- How collaboration with other teachers enables teachers to develop a better understanding of teaching and of teachers

Many books on teacher education assume that the most interesting parts of a teacher's professional development are what happens during their teacher training. The narratives in this book remind us that teacher development really starts once teachers enter their classrooms and begin teaching. The contributors describe how they addressed very basic issues in teaching, such as using literature in the ESL classroom, giving feedback on writing, the sequencing of classroom activities, conducting classroom discussions, teaching a basic writing class, negotiating student-teacher roles, understanding students' perceptions of learning, and lesson planning. The stories have in common their description of a teaching dilemma, the reasoning the teacher brought to the problem, how the teacher explored the problem and sought to resolve it, and what he or she learned during the process.

The 1986 report by the Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, Carnegie Corporation), proposed the use of teacher-generated case reports as a core resource in teacher education and recommended that "teaching cases illustrating a variety of teaching problems should be developed as a major focus of instruction" (p. 76). *Teachers' Narrative Inquiry as Professional Development* can be regarded as an implementation of this recommendation, expanding the notion of case reporting and providing a rich and powerful set of teacher narratives that will prove to be a valuable resource for language teachers and teacher educators.

Jack C. Richards

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## Preface

*Teachers' Narrative Inquiry as Professional Development* is a collection of highly personal, highly contextualized stories of teachers inquiring into their own experiences as learners of language teaching. As such, their stories of inquiry represent the journey of *how* they know as well as *what* they know. In Part I, "Inquiry into Instructional Practices," teachers' stories of inquiry are driven by a sense of dissatisfaction with some aspect of their classroom practice. Yet, as they examine their practice, they are compelled to confront how their understandings of teaching came to be; their own and their students' needs, interests, and objectives; and the institutional constraints within which they work. In Part II, "Inquiry into Language Learners," teachers' stories of inquiry highlight different methods of inquiry, for example, self-reflection, focus groups, journaling, interviews, and discourse analysis, that they have used to come to truly know their students, while at the same time gaining insights into themselves as teachers and their instructional practices. In Part III, "Inquiry into Language Teachers," teachers' stories of inquiry focus on their evolving beliefs and practices as they journey through various contexts, crossing boundaries of different countries, cultures, and roles. And finally, in Part IV, "Inquiry through Professional Collaborations," teachers' stories of inquiry stem from participation in collaborative professional communities, which enables them to learn about themselves as teachers, their students, and the value of being part of a community of teachers.

The purpose of this collection is to bring teachers' ways of knowing into our professional conversations so as to transform our understandings of language teachers and language teaching. By making teachers' ways of knowing public, open to review by others, and accessible to others in this profession, we hope to validate language teachers' ways of knowing and the activity of language teaching in ways afforded to other forms of scholarly work. We expect that readers of this collection will recall, rethink, and reconstruct their own ways of knowing about language teachers and language teaching. We encourage readers to look for multiple interpretations and multiple layers of meaning in these stories. We hope that doing this will

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change our collective perceptions of what counts as knowledge, who is considered a knower, and what counts as professional development.

As language teachers, teacher educators, and researchers, we are honored to have edited this collection. To the teachers who contributed to this book, we owe our deepest gratitude for their willingness to open up their minds, lives, and classrooms to us and to the entire language teaching profession. We also thank them for their open-mindedness in responding to our seemingly endless queries throughout the revising process, for their patience during the time-consuming review and publishing process, and most of all, for their commitment to the lifelong professional development of language teachers. We would also like to thank Jack C. Richards for his recognition of the value of this collection for the future of the language teaching profession and to Debbie Goldblatt, Mary Sandre, and Olive Collen for their help in the publishing process. As always, our deepest gratitude goes to our families, for their unwavering encouragement and support.

Karen E. Johnson  
Paula R. Golombek