

# How can I improve my support of teachers' Action Research Projects?

Diane Morgan

## Biography



Diane taught geography for twenty years at Pauline Johnson Collegiate and Vocational School before accepting various curriculum consultant roles for the Brant County and Grand Erie Boards of Education. She retired in 1999. Although she was presented with the ideas of action research during her Masters' studies at Queens University it was not until 1995 that she became involved in action research. Diane worked with superintendent Jackie Delong that year to experiment with an Action Research project supported by the Ontario Public Secondary Teachers Federation (OPSTF), and four boards. Her involvement has continued into retirement. This is her second analysis of the process she has gone through in supporting teacher research in the Grand Erie District School Board (GEDSB).

## Abstract

This paper is a followup to the research conducted in 2000- 2001 (Passion and Professional Practice, page 37, Volume 1, 2001.) It is an attempt to document and analyse the processes that have been put in place, in the projects Diane has managed, to support teachers conducting action research in Grand Erie.

### *Why it continues!*

In November 2003 Dr. Jack Whitehead, from the University of Bath in England, was conducting a session with our teachers as he does for us every year. I always look forward to these sessions because instead of leading the session I am able to sit back, listen to, and learn from Jack. I always find something in the session that stimulates my thinking. This year was no exception. The first prompt was Jack's exploring the nature of the conversation in his own action research groups. My reaction was to leave Jack mentally, while I thought about why it had not occurred to me to explore the conversation in our groups. I made a quick note in my journal and rejoined the conversation. Later in the session Jack became quite enthusiastic about the quality of the conversation and the energy in the room in the group work task he had set for the participants. We spoke about it briefly. The next day when I had him captive in my car en route to another session I explored with him the reasons for an improved quality of conversation. His answer was that he thought our promotion of a culture of inquiry that supported teachers in asking questions about their practice translated into a clearer focus (Journal entry, Nov. 26, 2003). It occurred to me that I should investigate this to see if it was in fact true in Grand Erie. Two other incidents in those two days stimulated me to investigate.

During the session Janet Trull said, "Doing action research has made me feel I can go to Principals and express my values because I have the confidence that I have the evidence of what I am doing" (quote in session, Nov. 25, 2003). This seemed to support what we were experiencing in the sessions. In the same session, Brian Mateljan and Alan McMillan walked in just as we were completing an explanation of our individual research in a round table setting. They did not even have their jackets off when Jack asked them about their research. To my amazement,

without any hesitation, they gave a credible explanation of what they were doing. In previous years I had been very careful to let people adjust to the session discussion before asking them to participate. Asking questions of them too soon created a discomfort for them, causing anxiety for many. This too seemed to be supporting the idea that the quality of what we were doing was improving greatly in Grand Erie. It seemed it was time, once again, to investigate and build on the research done in 2001. So, I set out to explore “How can I improve my support of teacher’s action research projects?”

## What has been happening?

### *The Quality of Questions*

The culture of inquiry promoted by Administrative Council (Director and Superintendents) since the early nineties and fostered by action research in the district is well established by this time. Teacher evaluation and district and school plans have also strengthened attitudes towards teachers questioning their own practice. Action research is not a new idea and the information flow about teachers research has gathered momentum since 1995. Teachers now approach us about getting involved in action research. Initially much time was spent formulating and refining questions. Great anxiety was expended in this process. In the early years it was often January before questions were refined and set. In some ways we are always refining our questions up until publication of our results. It is part of the research process. However the process is now much smoother. Questions were simple and straight forward as we learned how to question our own practice.

In the last year I have noticed that teachers get to the essence of what their research is more quickly. There is less anxiety expended over the process. Agendas indicate that sooner in the Fall the framing of questions drops off the agenda and becomes a more individual situation. Teachers often arrive knowing exactly what it is they want to know. The absence of notation of anxiety in my journals indicates that this is no longer the problem it once was. In 1999 I wrote in my journal on October 19,

*I would start more slowly and carefully next time.” In November I wrote, “comfort is increasing with the research, they are more willing to share .....they are actually doing more than they think they are but still have some difficulty seeing their everyday practice as a valuable research tool. (Nov. 10)*

The incident with Brain and Alan in November supports this. It also seems that the questions have more depth and a clearer focus. This may be in part a result of the fact that we began with pretty specific research into EQAO (Education Quality and Accountability Office) results (1999-2000 and 2000-2001), progressed on to portfolio assessment and teacher-led conferencing (2000-2001), opened the research up completely to individual choice (2001-2002) (2003-2004) and concentrated on special education inquiries (Autism, for example, in 2002-2003). Initially teachers were developing questions such as, “How can I improve student communication in math?” or “How can I improve student writing?” (Passion in Professional Practice, Vol.1, 2001). Now the questions are more varied and specific: “How can literature circles be integrated into my grade 3 language program?”; “How can I use early reading /writing intervention in the Primary grades to improve student learning and self-esteem?”; and “How do we build the capacity for understanding the needs of autistic students?” (Passion and Professional Practice Vol. 3, 2003). The quality of what goes on in the classroom is consistent but our skill in using the processes of action research becomes more sophisticated with each year.

### *Improving Writing*

Improving the personal and passionate nature of our writing is an on-going problem. This is difficult for teachers as it is often not part of our academic experience. Being passionate comes naturally to teachers orally but is

less frequent in our writings. We are more used to being dispassionate and objective in research. Teachers new to action research struggle with the qualitative nature of this research and often have difficulty maintaining journal entries to support their research. For this reason we have been putting narrative writing earlier and earlier in our process. This gives teachers more time for editing and reflection. A look back at agendas supports this pattern. In 2000 it was May before we did any formal writing, despite encouraging teachers to write in their journals. In 2001 we pushed this forward to April in order to allow teachers more time for editing and to improve the quality of the documentation in their reports. (There is a more in depth discussion of this in my initial research in *Passion and Professional Practice* p 42. 2001). As a facilitator I had learned. I noted the following in my journal.

*Teachers are clear on the process of what went on in their classrooms, but they only allude to how they know this. One of the jobs today was to make this more specific, sending them back to tapes and journals for the specifics. (May 3, 2000)*

Doing narrative writing sooner was complementary to our discussions of data collection. It helped to explain what data might be needed, and prevented teachers from losing important information that they would regret not having when it came to writing up their research. Frequently in sessions I would say, "Have you put that in your journal?" Some sessions were taped or taped and transcribed to help with the process of documenting their thinking. By 2002 I had pushed the writing sessions to March. This reduced the anxiety about how they would write up their research and whether they would have anything to say when the time came to write. It also allowed them to build first drafts of some of what they would write and stressed the need to keep their journals up to date. I was still learning! As the value of doing this became more obvious to me I pushed the writing earlier. In Nov 2002 I noted in my journal that "we ran out of time as Heather Knill-Griesser, Teacher Consultant - Primary Division (GEDSB) and I spent valuable time working with teachers on their narratives that had been assigned homework." By the March 2003 session enough people had significant portions written that we were able to spend one on one time with them working on the documentation of their findings.

Often writing in the form of "stream of consciousness writing" was a solution to the inevitable frustration that research produces. In one session, Anita Ricker explained how she was struggling with maintaining a personal journal of reflection. She was both frustrated and excited at what was happening in her classroom but was not getting those thoughts written down. She said,

*The best advice was when Jackie(Delong) said go home and write it...I went home and wrote for 3 hours!" (Journal entry, Feb.21, 2002)... In discussing this with Anita in June of 2004, she expanded on her thinking by saying the small group sessions allowed for dialogue.*

This conversation and opportunity for sharing motivated me to write about how I was feeling and what was happening in my classroom. (Journal reflection, June 9, 2004)

As teachers came to the sessions with clearer ideas of what they wanted to research, time spent in framing questions was reduced in favour of narrative writing. This had the added benefit of often clarifying what teachers needed to do and what data was needed. As indicated by Anita writing clarified her thinking. Teacher participants acknowledged this in our final session in June. Several others however, made the point that for some people the writing process is not the clarifier but it is the discussion process. Talking over their research with a partner or critical friend was what helped them to clarify their thinking (discussion and journal entry, June 9, 2004). There is no doubt that the introduction of writing earlier in the sessions reduced the anxiety and improved the research. For teachers who attend the sessions regularly and do the writing the problem of documentation has been reduced significantly over the years. All teachers found the group discussions, suggestions and support helpful (Discussion and journal entry, June 9, 2004). In asking researchers conducting second projects what advice they would give to

new researchers, Liana Thompson said, “really focus with keeping up with your journals.....I think because I was more familiar with the process of action research, I journalled much more efficiently.” Heather Knill-Griesser noted, “I did a more effective job at journaling for my second project. My journaling became more focussed and I was more relaxed with the journaling process (April 20, 2004). Experience is a great teacher. Writing earlier in the process helps as well. I still struggle with how to convince first time researchers that journaling is essential for the documentation of their findings in the write-up stage. We have become good at collecting pictures, marks improvements, student work -teacher type documentation, but less good at collecting comments from colleagues, parents, and documenting our own feelings as we progress through the project.

### Critical Friends

We have always emphasized the importance of critical friends and working with a partner in the same school. This has not always been possible. Action research is easier with a critical friend and /or partner.

*I worked with another teacher -although we wrote different papers and our questions were different, we conducted the research together and looked at the same students. I worked with another teacher during my first project, but not nearly as closely and we looked at different students” (Liana Thompson, April 20, 2004). Her partner on her first project, Diane Clark, commented after her second project, “I’d tell (a new researcher) to make sure they have someone in their school to work with - this was crucial to me in both of my action research projects” (April, 2004).*

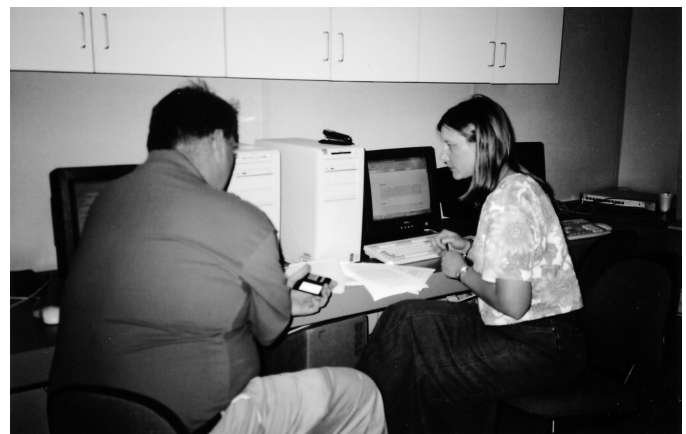


*Diane Clark and Deanna Gates planning together*

Each year the number of support staff sitting in on action research sessions, and supporting teachers with visits to their classrooms has increased. They have in many ways become the critical friends. There seem to be fewer teachers choosing critical friends and more teachers using support staff and facilitators as critical friends.

It’s true that those participating in release time projects have opportunities during the year to get the support they need at the sessions. This would also be true of those attending after school sessions. However there are times when sessions are infrequent, or teachers lose the contact with the group and frustration sets in. At these times I think it would be more beneficial to have a critical friend or partner in the school.

I wonder if we are replacing the need for a critical friend with good facilitator and support staff support. Considering how isolating teaching is, I wonder if teachers, initially see this support as enough. I wonder if it really is? It is good to know that teachers in Grand Erie feel supported by those of us in support positions. I have a feeling that we need to pay more attention to the critical friend aspect again and find a way to combine the support of staff with the support of a critical friend. I also think we have the same dilemma here as with the



*Dave Abbey working with Pam Wilson-McCormick*

journals. That being, how to convince teachers in their first project that working with a partner in a school is an easier and more comfortable way of conducting action research. I think we need to look at this more closely in subsequent years.

In 2002-2003 Rob Wong, Teacher Consultant - Information Technology (GEDSB) and Bill Valoppi, Program Co-ordinator Elementary Curriculum Assessment and Research (GEDSB), set up a computer conference for the teachers in the group. Teachers had a training session. They used the conference to contact us with questions. We used the conference to get information to them. But they did not use it to conference with each other. We failed to pick up on this and find out why it was not used. This would be worth trying again.

## Conclusion

I have been trying to monitor our conversation since November for content. I have gone back over tapes and transcripts of earlier years to see if the quality of the conversation has increased.

It's hard to say. From the beginning teachers have struggled with analysis and reporting what is taking place in their classrooms. Many times it is brutally honest, encouraging and even thrilling and motivating. And it always has depth and feeling. I think we need to continue to be attuned to the conversation in our sessions as an indicator of developing research and reflection skills. What is significant is the clarity of thinking that has developed as we improve our practice in framing questions and focussing on the critical aspects of our research. As I reflect over the last 5 years, I think we have made great progress as a district in our research and reflection practices. As a result of a positive culture of inquiry promoted by Administration, we have great number of teachers interested in analysing and improving their own practice. The support we provide through action research by encouraging critical friends, analysing what is happening in group sessions and encouraging early writing is resulting in a greater clarity and confidence on the part of the action researchers. Not only do they do an exceptional job in their classrooms but they are able to articulate why (or in some cases why not) their students are successful.

I always come out of the sessions energized by the enthusiasm and quality of teaching employed by these teachers. As I reflect over the years, I have seen increased participation, growth in process, skills and quality. It is an amazing experience for those of us involved in it. And while it is a very satisfying experience for those who do the action research, it is the students of Grand Erie who will benefit the most.