Building Teacher-Researcher Collaboration:
Dilemmas and Strategies

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Abstract

School-based and university-based research collaborations are becoming more common because they provide rich sources of data. Classrooms are complex systems and having the multiple perspectives of researchers from different contexts provides a broader and more dynamic view. However, collaborative research also brings with it some ethical issues researchers who have worked alone may not have experienced before. This paper examines problems of collaborative research and conditions for successful research that arose from discussions among university-based researchers. The problem areas that emerged ranged across a variety of epistemological and institutional Issues. These fell within seven large categories: (a) definitions of collaborative research, (b) roles of teachers and researchers, (c) time constraints, (d) expectations of employers, (e) whose voice gets heard, (f) openness and trust, and (g) political and institutional constraints. As with any dilemma, there are no clear solutions to the problems listed above. Explicitly considering the following conditions in response to the problems has, however, led to more satisfying and productive collaborative research relationships and products: (a) recognising that relationships take time, (b) recognising the role of disagreement, (c) discussing all aspects of the research project from the beginning, (d) acknowledging the organic nature of research projects, (e) striving to achieve parity in research relationships, and (f) reaching agreements about reporting the research.

There was a time when researchers might have made the case for limiting a classroom study to the perspective of the objective observer, that mythical creature who steps briefly into the flux of classroom life, extracts data, places it into preexisting categories, and derives answers to externally constructed questions. That observer would move from classroom to classroom, accumulating evidence, critiquing practice, and invariably ignoring the perspective of those living within the classrooms. The conclusions would be reported without regard to the knowledge, concerns, or feelings of the subjects of the study--the teachers and students.

Such studies continue today. Increasingly, however, researchers (and teachers, too) are calling for research that draws on all available resources, especially the perspective of those who experience classroom life directly and may be affected by the results of the research. Moreover, researchers recognize the ethical dimensions of entering into the lives of others, analyzing their actions, and making value judgments about their practices.

Calls for respecting the rights and views of others are not new. But they have assumed a central role in recent dialogues across diverse fields. Anthropologists, for example, have questioned the very foundations of their discipline, specifically the assumption that it is both epistemologically sound and ethically proper to objectify and speak for others. This has led to self-critiques of the ethnographic practice (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Rosaldo, 1987) and to an increasing focus on the study of practices close to home, such as in the work on the social construction of technological systems (Bijker, Hughes, & Pinch, 1987; Bijker & Law, 1992; MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1985). Researchers in other fields, such as history, sociology, political science, and economics have confronted analogous subject/object problems. This trend is evident even in business and industry, where there has been a growing recognition of the need to incorporate the perspectives of workers into decision making, as in quality circles.

In educational research, there is a similar shift underway. Grounded in the work done by anthropologists, educational researchers have begun to focus on the ethical and epistemological implications of the way research has been conducted traditionally. Numerous sessions at recent meetings of educational researchers, for example, have specifically addressed the need to consider the roles of teachers and researchers in collaborative research. Other sessions have been examples of new relations among the participants in research. Some sessions have also addressed the ethics of collaborative research.

Educational research, however, has not yet developed a code of ethics in collaborative relationships, and we are not aware of any professional

organization that has. Yet in relationships where there is an unequal power base, considering the ethics of the issues seems of paramount importance. Katz (1984) suggested that in classroom relationships between parents and teachers, "the more powerless the client vis-á-vis the practitioner, the more important the practitioner's ethics become" (p. 48). This would seem to hold true of the relationship between school-based researchers and university-based researchers as well.

Other ethical concerns in collaborations relate to what is made public out of the data, by whom, and representing what perspective. The traditional paradigm has the university-based researcher deciding what will be written, how it will be written, and actually completing the writing. There is currently a wide variety of practice from having the university-based researcher write, with the school-based researcher's awareness of what is being written (Clay, 1989); to each of the researchers writing her or his own section of a paper (Berkey, Curtis, Minnick, Zietlow, Campbell & Kirschner, 1990); to having writing made public only when the school-based researcher approves (electronic mail discussion on "xclass"--a network for qualitative educational researchers, December 12, 1992).

Clift, Holder, Veal, Johnson, and Holland (1991) describe additional ethical issues that emerged in a school-based research project. These issues arose in the context of individual, group, and institutional relationships. Clift et al. point out that "when a group of people from one institution agrees to participate in collaborative action research with another group from a different institution, the result is a complex set of intersecting relationships that pose ethical problems for all concerned . . ." (p. 18).

While educational researchers have tended to allude to the unique aspects of collaborative research when reporting studies or writing articles, few have focussed on how the collaboration itself has influenced the research. This article focusses specifically on this issue: what are the problems that arise when doing collaborative research and what are conditions that may help to alleviate those problems. This report examines some of the ethical dimensions of collaborative research and clarifies the dilemmas collaborators have faced and the strategies they have developed for coping with the complexity of new forms of research.

Understanding the Trade-Offs in Collaborative Research

Ethical concerns and struggles are not things we normally seek. Why would we engage in activities that call forth the concerns? What benefits do we derive that make the struggles worthwhile? It is worth noting a few of the

reasons that we and so many others value school-based and university-based researcher collaboration in classroom research.

One key reason is that classrooms are dynamic, multi-layered, multi-voiced social systems in which phenomena develop in subtle ways over extended time periods. The task of addressing this complexity in a serious way seems to call inescapably for multiple perspectives to register diverse events as well as converging perspectives on the same events. It seems vital that, of all possible participants, the teacher who is in the classroom hour after hour, and whose own values and agendas significantly shape social interactions there be a part of any attempt to understand classroom practices and consequences.

A complementary set of reasons emerges from the fact that different people bring to the classroom setting different sorts of expertise. A school-based researcher who knows the students over extended periods of time, who understands the school setting, who knows something of the students' experiences with other teachers, who knows parents and community concerns and values, and who participates in the classroom and school culture in an integral way brings invaluable expertise to any study. At the same time, a university-based researcher whose work demands familiarity with scholarly work on teaching and learning, who knows about research designs and publication practices, or who has the opportunity to observe many classrooms also brings special expertise. It seems foolish not to seek ways of sharing and using these rich and often different sorts of expertise.

Finally, there are strong personal reasons for school-based and university-based researcher collaborations in classroom research. Successful collaborations usually result in growth for all the parties involved, because each has to work to understand the perspectives, values, and knowledge of the other. This growth can demand significant amounts of time and energy, but it can ultimately be a source of mutual respect and professional growth.

In spite of these and other reasons for doing collaborative research, many problems are likely to arise. It is often difficult to reach equity in terms of effort and rewards. For example, schools and universities do not value equally attendance at professional conferences. Janet Miller (1992) expressed what this different valuing means in a recent article in which she described receiving the James Britton award from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE): "I experienced this moment as poignant, for I was also accepting the award for the other five [school-based] researchers who had contributed to the book (Miller, 1990), . . . but who could not leave their classrooms to travel to NCTE's Spring Conference" (p. 20). This is but one example of a large set of issues related to the fact that we operate out of

different institutions, with different power bases, with different demands on our time, and with differential rewards.

The issue of fairness in representing what is learned through research is sometimes conceived as an opposition between fairness to truth, with its attendant consequences for a larger audience, and fairness to individual teachers. Many other questions arise in light of this issue: Are there research issues that should not be pursued because doing so might be hurtful to a teacher? Are there findings that ought not be reported? Whose version of the work should be shared with others? What forums are most appropriate for what kinds of knowledge sharing? Who formulates the questions for research and what happens if there are very different agendas?

Questions such as these may not have simple answers. Instead, they may constitute dilemmas in the sense identified by Cuban (1992): "Dilemmas are conflict-filled situations that require choices because competing highly-prized values cannot be fully realized" (p. 6). Dilemmas are not solvable by new procedures, but may be understood, negotiated, and ameliorated through reflection and dialogue among all those concerned.

A recognition of this was what prompted our decision to gather collaborative researchers to discuss the dilemmas we face. If we value school-based and university-based researcher collaborations but encounter dilemmas in this collaboration, we need to find ways of sharing strategies for coping with them. We were well aware that it is essential for such dialogues, in general, to include school-based researchers as well as university-based researchers. At the same time, we felt justified in organizing a meeting in which participants would most likely be researchers with a focus on the researcher's role. Ethical discussions sometimes devolve into paternalistic concerns about school-based researchers--being fair to them, doing what's good for them, and so on. We believed that it was essential to work toward a reflective understanding of our needs as university-based researchers as one part of the overall process of understanding collaborative research.

As it turned out, the participants in the meeting represented diverse experiences with collaborative research, and they raised many important issues that went well beyond the role of researcher. Their discussion represents an important contribution to the dialogue on ethical dimensions of collaborative research. We believe that it is important to share this discussion with a wider audience. In the next section, we present a formulation of the issues raised in the meeting. In the spirit of the meeting, we have tried to reflect the diversity we heard and to represent all of the major points made by participants. At the same time, we have incorporated our own issues and

organized the discussion to make the ideas more accessible to a wider audience.

Sources of Problems in Collaborative Research

In the meeting, seven general topics emerged as problem areas. These concerns related to (a) definitions of collaborative research, (b) roles of teachers and researchers, (c) time constraints, (d) expectations of employers, (e) whose voice gets heard, (f) openness and trust, and (g) political and institutional constraints.

1. Definitions of Collaborative Research

One of the overarching concerns that arose in the discussion pertains to the definition of terms. What is a collaboration? What is cooperation? Collaboration is commonly used as a synonym for a relationship that is equal, yet the very nature of our working together with one person from a university and another person from a school system precludes an "equal" relationship--if equal implies that we are similar. To the contrary, the reason we want to work together is that we are not similar, we want to work in a complementary way, each contributing the expertise we have. We want to work together because we each have different things to contribute. But those differences mean that our abilities, interests, and needs are not the same, and so the relationship is not an equal one on all levels.

2. Roles of Teachers and Researchers

Even in collaborations where there seems to be an honest valuing of each other's contributions to the research venture, we often have preconceived notions of roles, including what it means to be a school-based researcher or a university-based researcher. These can easily get in the way. Discussion of the roles members of a collaboration will assume clarifies the shape the relationship will take. Along with notions about roles are perceptions of expertise. For example, we have found it helpful to clarify who takes field notes and when, how notes and videotapes will be viewed and analyzed, and who does the planning and actual orchestration of classroom activities throughout the day. Sharing these tasks facilitates sharing the multiple perspectives of the collaborating team members.

In many cases, there is an underlying assumption that the university-based person has more expertise than the school-based person--even in areas in which the university-based researcher might well have little expertise. If this leads to the school-based researcher deferring to the university-based

researcher, the collaboration collapses. Indeed, the university-based researcher, if testing ideas based on theory or data from other settings, is in need of the school-based researcher's sense of how to organize this particular setting or this particular group of children, or what might be the most effective and efficient way of working in the context.

3. Time Constraints

All university-based and school-based researchers are constantly under the pressure of time. This pressure is the source of a number of problems. Building a research relationship does not look or feel like time spent "researching," but it is often a crucial element to working together over the long haul and in the intense and close quarters of a classroom. Time is needed to have discussions and conversations about what has occurred and might occur. Time is needed to develop a common language and shared meanings. Time is needed to think about what is emerging out of the research that might be of significance to others. The nature of research work in classrooms also have the time constraint of school years ending and students moving on to another grade and another class.

4. Expectations of Employers

A fourth concern involves the product at the end of the research project. University-based researchers are expected to write, present at conferences, and publish. These are not activities that are expected of school-based researchers. In fact, professional paper/article/report writing is often not valued as a good use of time by the school system, and support for travel to conferences is slim or nonexistent. What is required of one member of the collaboration is discouraged by the employer of the other. If an article or presentation is not a desirable result of a project, it is important to determine what will be a useful product for the school-based researcher.

5. Whose Voice Gets Heard

School-based researchers receive significantly fewer rewards for consistently pursuing research in their classrooms. Because of this, the university-based researcher often initiates the contact or instigates the research project. Many university-based researchers want to have school-based research collaborators' opinions, perspectives, and voice equally present in the research development, implementation, and writing. This becomes complex if the university-based researcher has a clearer agenda, focus of study, or list of questions as a result of his or her respective job description.

Writing becomes a concern here as well. Depending on who writes the research and how the writing is done, the meaning of the research shifts. Shared authorship may not represent the mutual interests of all the researchers involved. If it does not, how the multiple perspectives of the research might be represented becomes important. If all of the researchers are not involved in the analysis and writing, the reader should be made aware of whose perspective is being read.

Indeed, this paper itself represents the approach of the two authors--both university-based researchers. Writing is a way of thinking and processing information, a way to deal with the issues that have resulted out of collaborative relationships. As stated earlier, all those sharing the concerns reflected in this paper are university-based researchers and thus the form and content of this article is a reflection of the training and ways of thinking university-based researchers have been encouraged to adopt. At a number of points along the way the question was raised about how these concerns might be different if we were school-based researchers. Some of us had been, yet all are currently based in university settings. Though there was concern about not second guessing the issues of school-based researchers, from past experiences there was the sense that school-based researchers might have primarily focused on change in the classroom context resulting from the research rather than writing about the dilemmas arising from doing the research itself.

6. Openness and Trust

If school-based researchers do share in the question formulation and the direction of the study, there are likely to be a number of areas where interests conflict. Often this revolves around issues of intervention of shifting ineffective student or teaching practices. While the university-based researcher my be interested in documenting student interactions or work and thinking about causes or the resultant symptoms, the school-based researcher might be more concerned about changing less effective ways of working. This also comes to the fore when discussing the scope of the research. It appears that often university-based researchers are more willing to isolate or narrow the focus of a study while school-based researchers are more aware of the multiplicity of factors and complex relationships between factors which they experience daily in the classroom setting.

Instead of recognizing the area of conflict and attempting to deal with it, the university-based researcher may try to manipulate the school-based researcher's questions or classroom to match what she or he wants to see.

This can directly influence the openness with which both parties talk and the trust the researchers have in each other.

7. Political and Institutional Constraints

There are political and institutional constraints in both universities and school systems that can significantly influence a research project. For example, university-based researchers have questioned who can afford to take part in collaborative research ventures. University politics dictate that nontenured faculty work diligently to produce as much research as quickly as possible. Collaboration, as discussed above, takes time. School-based researchers also face political implications. In some school systems research is not a valued use of classroom or teacher time and energy. At times, these constraints can dominate the research relationship. How do we present work that is an example of changing practice but is simultaneously an example of institutional barriers to change?

Conditions for Successful Collaboration

Although the above problems are dilemmas that have no clear solutions, they are worth discussing in a research relationship, and they seem more manageable if negotiated rather than avoided. Not necessarily requirements for a successful collaboration, the following conditions have led to more satisfying and productive collaborative research relationships and products. Some of the following conditions are ones to be aware of in the early stages of a research collaboration, some of the conditions have to do with the researcher's stance during the project, and some of the conditions speak to what happens at the end of the project. The following list is not exhaustive, but each of the conditions is an example of something worth considering when entering a collaborative research relationship.

1. Recognize that relationships take time

One way to deal with the problem stated above of "time constraints" (problem #2) is to openly recognize that in collaborative research time is invested in the relationship as well as in the data collections. Because the nature of collaborative research usually requires people to work together to an intense degree, successful collaborations seem most often to grow out of existing relationships. If it is a new research relationship for both collaborators, time needs to be invested in developing a relationship in which to work on the project together.

2. Recognize the role of disagreement

When dealing with "whose voice gets heard" (problem #4 above) it is helpful to acknowledge that the goals and interests of the collaborators are not necessarily the same. Thus, there may be a number of end products or it may necessitate investing extra time in conversation about where the research is going. Disagreement is not necessarily a sign of a poor or dysfunctional relationship. If disagreements between the university-based researcher and the school-based researcher are seen as a context for negotiation rather than a negation of either person's opinions, they provide for enhanced research and can broaden the scope of the research. Disagreements can help focus and clarify many areas of the research project. They may also point out different agendas or ways the collaborators can complement each other or work in different areas informing each other's work.

3. Discuss all aspects of the research project from the beginning

One way to address "different definitions of collaboration" (problem #1) and "the roles of school-based researchers and university-based researchers" (problem #2) is to discuss from the outset of the collaboration what the relationship will be, what the roles in the relationship might be, and what final products might come out of the collaboration. It is also beneficial to take the time required to develop a common language so all parties in the relationship can communicate with equal fluency. In doing this, however, it seems paramount to understand the dynamic nature of research and relationships--thus the following condition.

4. Acknowledge the organic nature of research projects

Relationships and research projects are organic. They grow and change constantly as they are being carried out. Flexibility in adapting to changing situations is crucial.

5. Strive to achieve parity in research relationships

Related to the problems of the "role of the school-based and university-based researchers" (#2) and "openness and trust" (#5) it is clear that implicitly and explicitly throughout the research process the contributions of all collaborating researchers need to be acknowledged and valued. Clarifying roles helps define the unique contributions each member can make. Discussing roles and relationships from the beginning helps to lay the foundation for openness and trust. This can also be based in discussions of what collaborative research means to each member of the team (problem #1 above).

Recognizing the complementary nature of and parity in relationships, rather than stressing absolute equality helps provide for successful collaborations. Research relationships are symbiotic ones in which each member is dependent on the other for the research to be successful. Basic respect for all involved, with everyone's ideas being considered and valued, is foundational.

6. Reach agreements about reporting the research

In dealing with "whose voice gets heard" (problem #4), "political and institutional constraints" (problem #6), and the "expectations of the respective employers" (problem #3) it is crucial to discuss products that might result from the research early in the process. It seems important that all collaborators grow in their professional lives and find that the research facilitates learning that can be applied more broadly than one particular setting.

How the research will be reported is closely tied to the products that result from the research. Even if one of the members of a collaboration will not be present at a conference or will not be listed as an author on a paper because that is not a valued or necessary product for the researcher, he or she usually will want to be apprised of what is to be said or published. If this will not the case in reporting the research to the public, that also must be clear at the outset.

Conclusion

While the listed conditions may define the context for success, it is important to remember that not all schools, universities, and collaborative relationships are situated in a context that would meet the conditions. We may often find ourselves working under conditions that are not ideal for successful collaborations, and we need to understand how to function within those constraints. To revel in the many facets of these relationships is, at times, a frustration, but the pay-off is great enough that those of us involved in collaborative relationships are willing to live with the tensions.

Collaborative relationships are new to many of us and, as such, are still areas where we are exploring "what works." We have found that keeping the six conditions mentioned above in mind (and being aware of the pitfalls presented in the seven problems) had laid the foundation for repeated successful relationships--to school-based and university-based researchers who are willing and eager to maintain and continue research collaborations.

It is also clear that whether this is the first or the twentieth collaborative research project we are entering, each new relationship requires that we take a fresh look at our assumptions and roles. Yet the mutual rewards have been great enough for those of us involved in collaborative research to continue to work at satisfying and stimulating research relationships.

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