

# from “In my humble opinion” by Kate Nonesuch

# What do you think?

■ When I first looked into taking part in research in practice, I was suspicious. Later I was seduced into taking part in a collaborative research project that coloured my life for a year and a half, which became *Dancing in the Dark: How do Adults with Little Formal Education Learn? How do Literacy Practitioners do Collaborative Research?* (Niks et al.). The experience enriched me personally, stimulated me intellectually and brought me into contact with many interesting instructors and researchers, although the process raised many questions for me about the value of research in practice and the way it works in real life. I'll talk personally here, as a regular, full-time instructor at a satellite campus of a university-college in BC, and coming to my practice from the left, from a feminist perspective, and from a position of trying to elaborate and reduce the power differential between me and the students in my program. In the following section I explore how the roles of researcher and instructor conflict.

## I've always done informal research—why isn't that good enough?

I have learned to be a good instructor from my students. Term after term, I have attempted to teach the same skills to different groups of students, using various methods and materials. Every term I have reflected on the factors of successes and failures; every term I have gone to workshops or conferences and/or read articles and books about teaching; every term I have noticed students' reactions; every term I have asked students what worked for them and what didn't work, and for suggestions for improvement. Every good instructor I know, at the end of the term, starts talking about how s/he will apply this term's reflections to next term's planning and teaching. Over the years, I have given about 50 workshops on aspects of my practice to other instructors, and I have attended many given by other instructors.

Research in practice is presented as an add-on to practice; yet I say that practice includes this informal research. If you do not reflect, you do not practice.

I found, however, that I got much more prestige when my work was labelled “research.” The first indication I had was the article in the local paper that resulted from the National Literacy Secretariat's announcement of the grants they had given. The headline for the story called me “professor.” For the previous ten years I had appeared in that same newspaper two or three times a year, always to do with my work in literacy, but I had always been called “instructor”—never had they referred to me as “professor.” And the work of research—being able to bring grants into the college, to publish a report or an article, to present my findings at a conference—all this work seems to be considered more tangible and important than turning out class after successful class, year after year. Why is the work that I am trained to do, and paid to do—classroom instruction—less valuable than this extra piece, research in practice?

## A different sense of time

As a researcher, I have a different sense of time and a different sense of quality control. As an instructor, I know I have to be ready and “on” at a certain time every day. The preparation I do for each class is necessarily imperfect.

*This column is a space to explore grey areas and uncertainties. We hope that this tongue-in-cheek piece will **provoke many discussions!** Let us know if it does!*

When nine o'clock rolls around, I have to be there in the classroom as prepared as I am. There can be no extension of prep time (unless I decide to put off that particular lesson, in which case I have to be prepared for another). Until I stop teaching, there is no "final" time for me to lead a class in any particular skill or concept. Doing as well as can be done in the time at hand is good enough for this time; there will be another time to think about it and teach it again. My own reflection as an instructor is never finished. My personal style suits this kind of timing—artificial deadlines strictly enforced, yet never a time when something is truly finished; always a chance to go back again.

As a researcher, the "final report" looms large. To put my findings in writing in some final form, for the world to see, is daunting. I know that I could reach conclusions that are more relevant, more accurate, more interesting if I had more time; I know I could write more persuasively, more clearly, if I had more time.

In the world of pure research, I think there is more time—surely this is part of the reason that Royal Commissions and theses and final reports routinely come in late. As an instructor, there is never more time. I know that when my time is up for the research project, my time will be filled with something else. I cannot postpone January classes, not even for one day, because I have not finished thinking about the research I did in the fall term. I am used to getting things done to artificial deadlines, but the "final" in final report rings so loud. I am not used to never having a chance to modify or reject conclusions I came to the year before.

As a practitioner-researcher, how can I operate in these two time frames at the same time? How can there be more time to perfect my conclusions when there is no more time?

## Headwork vs. heart work

It seems to me that research is mainly headwork. You set up a project to look objectively at some question; you try to let the data speak for itself; you put in some checks and balances so that what comes out is not merely your opinion. You try to distance yourself emotionally from your interview subjects or your data. (If you have an ethics committee to approve your research, they help or insist that you do it.) Of

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course, many researchers have their heart in their research questions, but the essence of the research is to put the heart in the back seat.

Teaching has a combination of headwork and heart work, but for me, the heart work is the driving force. I teach real individuals with real lives and am likely to put their needs before the exigencies of research. The research has necessarily a narrow focus; when I am acting both as instructor and researcher, the teaching may include the narrow focus of the research, but also reaches far beyond it. When there is a conflict, the instructor wins out, and I feel guilty neglecting the research or not doing it well enough. Or conversely, when there is a conflict, the researcher wins out, and I feel guilty about not doing as much as I normally would to put the students' interest first.

We have to do research, the other guy's area of expertise; why don't they come and teach literacy?

As soon as I write this, I see how ludicrous it is. Why would we think people whose expertise is research, whose love is research and whose art form is research, would be any good operating in the arena I am good in? So why should I think that I could operate in the arena of research with only a few days of training? If I want to do research, why not go back to school to study to be a researcher? If I want to do good research, what do I need to know and to be? As I work with people who are academically trained in research, I am amazed at the depth and breadth of their knowledge and thinking about research—about methodologies, about ethics, about the relevance of data, about the treatment of data, about objectivity and subjectivity. Surely the idea that I can do research as well as they can is as ludicrous as thinking that they would be able to enter my classroom and start teaching literacy as well as I do. Like Dr. Johnson's dog that walked on two legs, it is no wonder I do research badly—the wonder is that I do it at all. ■

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**KATE NONESUCH** has been an ABE instructor in the college system in British Columbia for many years. She wrote this piece for the national framework project, *Focused on Practice*. To read the complete essay, go to [www.literacyjournal.ca](http://www.literacyjournal.ca), click on Crazy Wisdom, choose Wild Cards, then National and then click on In My Humble Opinion.