

# Book Review

by Mary Hookey

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**Wells, Gordon. (Ed.). (2001). *Action, talk, and text: learning and teaching through inquiry*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University. 231 pages. ISBN 0-8077-4014-4 (paper)**

In 1990, Marilyn Cochrane-Smith and Susan Lytle argued that "What is missing from the knowledge base for teaching are the voices of the teachers themselves, the questions teachers ask, the ways teachers use writing and intentional talk in their work lives, and the interpretive frames teachers use to understand and improve their own classroom practices." The ultimate goal for teachers is the enhanced learning of their students.

*Action, talk, and text: learning and teaching through inquiry* lets us hear the questions teachers ask, hear their concerns and reflections, and discover how they attend to the details of dialogue and discussion in their classrooms. The authors in this book are all members of the Developing Inquiring Communities in Education Project (DICEP). This group emerged from a research project on "Learning through Talk" funded by the Spencer Foundation in 1991. The goal of the Developing Inquiring Communities in Education Project is to create opportunities that help students learn to "act, think, and feel in ways that contribute to the common good and enrich their own individual lives" (p.1). In their initial work, the researchers were "certain that the essence of teaching and learning was to be found in the interaction among students and teachers" (p.3). They concluded that "the most valuable talk occurs in the context of exploration of events and ideas in which alternative accounts and explanations are considered and evaluated" (p. 3). Therefore, they wanted to understand what enhances student learning by investigating "the conditions that make such talk possible" (p.3). The book outlines the framework that they developed collaboratively for interpreting, imagining and explaining how learning occurred in the classroom. .

In the opening chapter, Gordon Wells provides a brief introduction to the DICEP group and explains how the focus on inquiry emerged. This narrative of the group's uneven journey toward their current understanding of the necessity for inquiry should be instructive to any university-school or university\_teacher research collaborative. They concluded that "the force that drives the enacted curriculum must be a pervasive spirit of inquiry, and the dominant purpose of all activities must be an increase in understanding" (p. 7) As a result, they adopted an action research stance to their work. Wells describes how a question from the program officer of the funding agency prompted extensive thinking about how the individual research studies in the funding proposal were linked. The result is a conceptual model which they overlay on the more procedural action research cycle of plan, act, observe, interpret. In their model, *Vision* is juxtaposed to Plan, *Practice* to Act, *Data* to Observe, and *Theory* to Interpret. Wells provides a detailed explanation of this conception of educational action research. As a brief example, the element of *vision* places a strong emphasis on community, collaboration, outreach and intellectual achievement. The conceptual model captures the sense of being *in* research as

opposed to *doing* research, much like the authentic feeling of moving from "Talking Together" to "Being Together in Talk" described by Judith Lindfors (1988).

Eight of the eleven chapters are written by teachers about their classroom research. The authors are linked by a commitment to answering two main questions:

- How can teachers create and sustain communities of inquiry in their classrooms?
- What kinds of discourse promote and extend inquiry and enable participants to transform their individual and collective understandings? (p. 21)

There are four sets of chapters in the book. One set focuses on research in the elementary grades. The researchers ask questions about the nature and meaning of a community of inquirers including: the values and expectations that make a difference when classroom communities are formed (Donoahue); the value placed on the use and timing of student questions in classroom inquiry (Van Tassell); and, the comparative importance of two types of student-led discussion and the concept of negotiation for building a community of inquiry (Davis). Wells revisits a familiar piece of his videotaped interaction with two elementary-age learners to discover something new about the importance of "nonverbal dimensions of conversational meaning-making" (p. 94). The result of his analysis and work is a new analytic tool that extends conversational analysis to these nonverbal dimensions.

Another set of chapters focuses on research in grades seven and upwards. Questions about inquiry-based learning are explored in the context of science (Hume) and social studies (Kowal) classes, and a leadership lab (McGlynn-Stewart). Hume develops a "knowledge wall" as the place for making dialogue visible; as students post questions in the form of notes on the "wall," they both display and stimulate their on-going reflection through dialogic writing. Kowal analyzes the impact of the dialogue in a simulation of a Supreme Court Hearing. McGlynn Stewart explores adolescent resistance to instructional change in the direction of inquiry. In the fourth chapter in this section Hume expands the nature of her classroom investigation reported in Chapter 6. She involves a small group of students who doubted the value of classroom discussion for their learning as co-researchers on the worth of this practice. As one student reports, "Andrew says its worthwhile and we're learning a lot of things about talk we would never have even noticed" (166).

The authors provide us with a number of examples of classroom talk and self-talk as they engage in the teaching/learning activities. For example, we hear students discuss their understanding of the value of dialogue and class discussion (Hume, Chapter 9), or work through their ideas about gas and liquids while trying to understand if this work was really answering their own questions (Van Tassell, Chapter 3). Each teacher-researcher's chapter develops explanations and theory for what has happened, and what might happen next, thus supporting the case Wells presents in Chapter 10, "The case for dialogic inquiry." This chapter provides an overview of the writings of action researchers and social constructivists who have influenced the group's "ways of thinking about knowing and coming to know and the roles of discourse in these processes" (p. 15). The subtitles in the chapter -- Changing views of knowledge and coming to know, Constructing knowledge in collaboration with others, Knowing in action and reflection, and Discourse and knowing -- give a sense of the intellectual breadth of this chapter.

Final words go to the teachers. Monica Glynn-Stewart uses the eye of both participant and critical friend to review the teachers' comments on learning through participation in DICEP. With the emphasis on moving their practice closer to their vision, and using data to refine and develop theory, they realize that they have become part of an international collection of teacher-researchers focused on a deeper understanding of teaching and learning. Readers will find the additional reference list of publications by members of the DICEP Group useful.

At the beginning of the book, Gordon Wells noted the difficulties of working for improved teaching and learning when political decisions actually restrict opportunities to reach these goals. However, if we assume that the concept of vision itself (no matter what its content) can inspire our actions, we might also assume that this book has the potential to inspire new images of more powerful teaching and learning for educators and politicians -- images of schools and classrooms that provide opportunities to transform students' and teachers' "capacities to act, think, and feel in ways that contribute to the common good and enrich their own individual lives" (p. 1).

## References

1. Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. (1990). Research on teaching and teacher research: The issues that divide. *Educational Researcher*, 19(2), 2-10. ERIC Document Reproduction Service EJ411275
2. Lindfors, J. (1988). From "Talking Together" to "Being Together in Talk." *Language Arts*, 65 (2). 135-141. ERIC Document Reproduction Service EJ367218.