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Moving from Them to Us: Making New Arguments about Teaching and Learning via Teacher Inquiry
Christina Saidy, Associate Professor, Arizona State University, NCTE lifetime member, joined CEL 2015

In the current educational climate, teachers and administrators report feeling the heavy burden of political pressures on schools. Budget cuts, standards, and scripted curricula are just a few of the elements that contribute to increased pressure among teachers. Arizona, where school funding per student is the lowest in the United States (Irish, 2015), is currently experiencing a teacher shortage that is resulting in challenges recruiting and maintaining teachers when schools are so publicly undervalued. A unique challenge in this state’s current educational climate is cultivating teacher leaders despite public scrutiny of education and negative public arguments about teachers.

Teacher inquiry, or teacher action research, is a well-documented approach that encourages teachers to conduct formal and informal research in their own classrooms as a way to improve instruction (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Shagoury & Power, 2012), understand school culture (Fecho, 2000; Herr, 1999), and position themselves as activists working for change in their schools (Cochran-Smith & Stern, 2014; Early, 2014). However, more importantly, in an educational climate where teachers feel undervalued or publicly unappreciated, teacher inquiry work provides these teachers with an opportunity to interrogate public arguments made about them and counter those arguments with new arguments grounded in their own research findings. For language arts teachers, teacher inquiry has the potential to be an especially relevant activity since it helps them practice forming and making arguments about teaching and learning as they are teaching these same writing concepts in their classes.

As a teacher educator and former language arts teacher, I am committed to providing teachers with specific writing skills and strategies to structure effective classroom instruction and to move teaching forward via writing and inquiry. As such, I led a teacher inquiry group at a local high school* in which I implemented specific writing strategies to guide teach-

*Names of the teachers and school in the case study are pseudonyms
ers through research projects. In this article, I use a case study format to explore the experiences and growth of one language arts teacher, Chris, during the course of the teacher inquiry group. Through this case study, I will illustrate the power of teacher inquiry groups to inspire teachers to re-search teaching and learning in their schools in order to make persuasive arguments about student learning, teacher needs, and school culture that position them as formal and informal leaders in their school settings.

Structuring Inquiry to Understand and Form Arguments

This particular inquiry group was structured as an after-school professional growth opportunity. However, groups such as this could easily meet formally or informally during prep periods or during time designated for Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) or related faculty work groups. This inquiry group met for two hours once monthly for the duration of the school year. Between meetings, the teachers worked on their inquiry projects individually, met together informally, and posted to a group blog. The inquiry group was structured to encourage teachers to move systematically through the inquiry process and included asking questions, designing classroom research, conducting classroom research and collecting data, analyzing data, and presenting findings to the group, school administrators, and students in a poster session.

As teachers moved through the parts of the inquiry process from asking questions to presenting findings, they participated in writing tasks and practiced writing strategies that encouraged them to question, observe, test, and report their research processes (see Table 1). These writing strategies were rhetorically focused on audience, context, and purpose. The tasks called on teachers to consider public audience as they shaped instruction and communicated about their teaching and students’ learning.

Chris and Community High

Chris is a twelfth grade English language arts teacher. At the start of the inquiry group, he was at the beginning of his second year teaching at Community High School and his sixth year of teaching. In those six years, he had taught classes ranging from seventh to twelfth grade. Chris is a tall white man with a deep voice and a wry sense of humor. Prior to teaching he had a career in the military. Although he has a commanding presence, he is kind, sensitive, and deeply committed to his teaching. In addition to teaching his required courses, Chris teaches an after-school class for students who are at risk of not graduating.

Chris’s school, Community High School, is an urban school in the Southwest where 94 percent of the students identify as Hispanic/Latino and 93 percent of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch. At the end of the 2013–14 school year, the year in which this inquiry group took place, the school moved from a C grade on the statewide school rating system to a B grade, and teachers and administrators were proud of this achievement. Furthermore, this small improvement in school grade relieved some of the institutional and political pressure felt by teachers and administrators.

Like many teachers in urban school settings, Chris feels challenged in his teaching environment. While Chris teaches senior English, he does not teach honors, AP, or dual-credit courses. He works to prepare all of his students for college but only 11 percent of Community High School’s seniors attend college. Furthermore, through the course of the teacher inquiry group, Chris expressed dissatisfaction about his students’ motivation and the school’s attendance issues, which he believed negatively impacted instruction and student learning.

At the beginning of the teacher inquiry group, Chris frequently complained about his students. He and the other teacher participants focused on the students’ deficits and the challenges of teaching in their school settings. However, as his inquiry project progressed, Chris focused less on student deficits and more on his own role in student learning.

In this article, I will focus on Chris’s experience in the inquiry group and show how his teacher research helped him to make specific, school-focused arguments about student learning that better positioned him as a leader in his school. The case study of Chris illustrates the power of teacher inquiry groups to inspire teachers, in the face of political and institutional pressures, to research teaching and learning in their schools in order to make persuasive arguments about student learning, teacher needs, and school culture.

Starting with Them

Chris came to the teacher inquiry group because he was invited by the school curriculum coordinator who organized the group. Furthermore, Chris said he participated in the inquiry group because he is “always looking for new ways to teach and to improve.” Despite his emphasis on personal growth as a reason for participating in the inquiry group, Chris focused much of his energy and attention in the first four meetings on the inadequacies of his students. At the first session, Chris reported that his biggest challenge as a teacher was “motivating students who just don’t care.” When he talked about his ideal teaching days, which were “seldom but becoming more frequent,” Chris discussed what got in the way of ideal teaching days: “lack of prior knowl-
edge and students' inability to extend ideas to other areas.” At the beginning of the year, Chris saw the students’ lack of motivation as personal shortcomings unrelated to his teaching or to the political and institutional conditions of learning at Community High School.

In the early meetings of the inquiry group, Chris expressed frustrations that many teachers feel in the face of teaching standardized curricula and challenging content that is often far removed from student experience. For Chris, these challenges were further compounded by institutional challenges, such as the school attendance problem. For example, when asked to describe his overall school climate, Chris responded, “We don’t do enough about attendance. We have students who miss half of the semester but nothing is done to them.” In the face of the political, curricular, and institutional pressure, Chris often focused on student and institutional deficiencies as the root of problems and impediments to his effective teaching. In essence, he made arguments about what his students could or could not do and why. The arguments were about them and their deficiencies.

The first exercise in the inquiry group asked teachers to identify an issue or problem in their classrooms or teaching that they would like to address and investigate. As a twelfth grade ELA teacher, Chris was tasked with teaching British literature, and he reported being frustrated that students could not make connections to the reading or make inferences when reading. At the second meeting of the inquiry group, Chris recounted a story of teaching the Canterbury Tales. He desperately wanted the students to connect to the reading and to Chaucer, so he used a current-day metaphor, asking the students to imagine that they were tutors to Sasha and Malia Obama to understand a more modern-day notion of public service to the aristocracy. Chris reported that the students still did not make the connections he’d hoped for, and he was disappointed.

Chris felt he had chosen a relatable example but that his students’ deficits prevented them from understanding. Therefore, for his classroom issue or problem, Chris chose to focus on his students’ inability to make inferences.

**Asking Questions and Making a Move**

In the second exercise in the inquiry group, teachers took their issue or problem and used it to form research questions and design teacher research studies to conduct in their own classrooms. One of the meetings focused specifically on questions. To prepare for the meeting, the participants each wrote a blog post. Chris began his blog post, “My problem is getting students to infer rather than just take what is written in black and white literally.” Later in the post, Chris talked about his research plan. He wrote:

> My first idea is to have a student in each of my classes fill out a character worksheet on themselves. I will then use that worksheet a week or so later to have the rest of the class draw the character I am describing. I can then have them try to figure out who the actual character is, which I doubt anyone will be able to do.

Chris’s blog post, which was the first step in his process of asking questions and forming a research plan, illustrates some of Chris’s doubt about his students’ abilities, which is rooted in his emphasis on students’ deficits, paired with a sense of hopelessness.

As a follow-up to these blog posts, the inquiry group participants used a worksheet I created to further develop the research questions they had written to complete the blog post. At the beginning of the workshop, Chris’s questions were:

1. How can I influence my students to become passionate about the topic?
2. How do I get students to make connections?
3. How do I get students to think? Analyze? Discover?

These questions, like much of Chris’s early reflection, were very student-focused and somewhat deficit-centered. For example, question three assumes students do not think, analyze, or discover. Assumptions such as this are grounded in a deficit-focused view of students and their learning and have the potential to lead to negative arguments about students’ abilities and learning. However, these questions also show Chris’s understanding that he has a role in his students’ learning, since each of the questions begin with “How do/can I...”. These research questions show Chris’s understanding of his responsibility in moving the students forward.

The worksheet the participants used to develop their questions included specific questions and prompts for helping the teachers shape their research questions for viable projects but also to consider the arguments about their students, school, and instructional methods to begin negotiating institutional pressures. For example, the second item asked participants to consider the parts of the question. In response to this prompt, Chris wrote:

1. Do I make connections?
2. How do I model connections?
3. Do I know enough about my students’ lives to guide them into making personal connections?

These more specific questions show a change for Chris. He was no longer focusing on his students’ perceived deficits as a motivation for his questioning or research. Rather, he fo-
focused on his abilities and his role in giving students the tools they needed to do the type of critical thinking he was hoping they would do. Later, in response to a prompt asking him to “Get more specific,” Chris wrote, “What connections am I looking for?” and “Why are connections important?” This was a major shift for Chris. Not only was he considering the ways he taught what he wanted his students to know, but also he was considering the value of that learning for his students and for himself.

Defining and redefining research questions prompted Chris to think carefully about the ways he sees his students and his teaching. Chris cares deeply about his students; he often comes to school early or stays late to help them, teaches an after-school class for at-risk students who might not graduate without the class or his help, and was, and continues to be, deeply invested in remedying the school attendance issue. However, his early responses did not reflect this deep care for his students. As Chris refined his research questions, this care became more evident. Chris started to make affirmative arguments about what his students needed to know, why that was important, and what his responsibility was in teaching that knowledge. Chris’s arguments moved from arguments about “them” to more inclusive arguments that included the teacher and considered cultural or institutional pressures or constraints.

**Them to Us**

From the question phase, Chris went on to design a sophisticated teacher research project. He created pre and post assessments and three minilessons to specifically teach the skills he wanted his students to gain. After collecting all of the student work, Chris designed a rubric to measure student responses and analyze the data. Throughout the process, he sought my advice and worked earnestly to design and assess instruction that helped his students obtain skills that not only were necessary and important in meeting the standards but also helped them connect to their lives beyond school.

In his reflection on the teacher research project, Chris wrote, “My students can infer! It was interesting how small minilessons and activities add to student knowledge.” At the beginning of the teacher inquiry, Chris made arguments about what his students could not do, but by the end of the research project, Chris’s arguments focused on what students could do and the ways that he and the students were responsible for the change. Furthermore, Chris went on to write that the research project, “made me consider my expectations. I had assumptions that students should know how to do things and realized I need to provide minilessons and activities on prior knowledge to bring it back to their active minds.” This passage illustrates Chris’s increased understanding of the impact of institutional pressures on teaching and learning and the ways assumptions are grounded in these pressures. Furthermore, it shows that Chris came to understand how both he and the students are responsible for learning. Instead of simply expecting his students to come with knowledge and being disappointed when they did not bring that prior knowledge, Chris learned to take a step back, assess what his students know, and design responsive lessons to move his students forward.

Chris changed the types of arguments he made about teaching and learning in his classroom from “them,” or arguments grounded in student deficits to “us,” arguments grounded in productive colearning between teachers and students. Chris reports being proud of “the improvements I’ve seen in my students . . . some of my students surprised me with their ideas.” At the beginning of the inquiry group, Chris was not making the types of arguments about teaching and learning that would allow him to be surprised by students since he was limited by his focus on assumptions about students’ abilities to learn. However, through this process he came to see his students and himself as capable collaborators who could make surprising strides throughout the course of the school year.

**Implications for Classroom Teaching**

Chris’s inquiry work and the way he learned to make arguments about teaching and learning directly impacted instruction in his classroom. Chris had long struggled with teaching research-based argument writing to his seniors within the context of the broader British literature curriculum adopted by the school and district. Since Chris believed his students lacked the ability to connect to the literature, his argument-writing assignments were typically simplified literature-based arguments.

However, while participating in the teacher inquiry group and the inquiry process, Chris began to re-envision argument writing for his students. He designed an inquiry project for use in his classroom. In this project, students began with questions that derived from the curriculum and used those questions to investigate issues in their own school and community. At the April meeting of the inquiry group, four of Chris’s students conducted a survey and video interviews of teachers for their argument-writing assignment. Chris used the strategies and skills he learned in the inquiry group—asking questions, collecting data, and forming arguments—to...
restructure the argument writing unit in his classroom. Further, Chris invited his students to visit the teacher inquiry posters that he and his colleagues collected. I watched as the students asked Chris questions about his research and his argument about their learning and as Chris made connections to the students own inquiry research projects.

Through the inquiry process, Chris gained awareness of skills and strategies for conducting research and analyzing data to make arguments about teaching and learning in his classroom. These strategies were not only helpful to Chris as a teacher and leader in his school but also informed the teaching of argument writing in his classroom.

Beyond his own classroom, Chris’s teacher inquiry project positioned him as a leader in his school. Chris reported that his findings could help others in his subject area since he can, “show them how minilessons can improve student performance.” Furthermore, Chris presented his findings to the inquiry group and his administrators as well as at the state conference for English language arts teachers. Finally, since the conclusion of the inquiry group, Chris has taken a leadership role in his school—he is leading the committee dealing with the school attendance problem via building bridges between parents, students, teachers, and administration.

Making Arguments to Make Change

The teacher inquiry group at Community High School provided Chris and his colleagues with access to specific writing exercises, writing environments, research strategies, and collaborative activities that encouraged the participants to think critically and respond actively to perceived questions or problems in their teaching and professional lives. In doing so, teachers such as Chris were encouraged to consider and interrogate the ways that they make arguments about teaching and learning.

Chris, and the majority of the teachers in the inquiry group were feeling challenged by the institutional and political pressures of teaching in their urban school setting. These pressures manifested in deficit-based arguments about the teachers about their school and students. Chris acknowledged that these same types of arguments were made about him as a teacher and his school in public life. The inquiry group offered Chris and his colleagues an opportunity to learn how to conduct research and use various forms of data to shape teaching and speak to a variety of audiences about the realities of their teaching situations. In essence, this inquiry work helped the teachers shape their arguments about teaching and learning from “them,” or deficit-based arguments, to “us,” or collaboratively focused and often activist arguments that encouraged them to be leaders in their subject areas and schools.

English educators are in a unique position to implement the writing and argument strategies typically covered in English language arts and college composition courses in teacher inquiry groups. Teacher inquiry groups that employ a rhetorical framework and include exercises focused on audience, context, purpose, ethos, and so on, encourage an argument-focused framework for inquiry that requires teachers to think about the arguments made about them, the ways they make arguments, and the ways to shape arguments to bring about change. This approach can be particularly empowering for teachers who feel the institutional and public pressures that are so prevalent in this era of standardization and limited school budgets.

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References


