

Changing Self-definitions: The Agency of Action Research for Teachers

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Abstract

This article makes a case that teachers who engage in site-based action research become more efficacious leaders. Based upon his twelve years as Director of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement at the University of Alberta, the author considers the impact of teachers' work as site-based researchers on their personal growth, their self-definition as educational researchers, and their increased sense of agency gained from designing and conducting research. The article's theoretical framework centers upon the theoretical work of Walker Percy to explore the ideas of engaged experience (in this case site-based action research) vs. "packaged" experiences (the study of others' research and the attempt to apply the findings of their research to one's own site). The author makes a case that working to solve personal and real on-site problems using action research can edify the entire community.

Keywords: teacher researchers' personal growth; engaged experience vs. "packaged" experience; the concept of agency; teacher researchers' sense of agency.

1. Introduction

The province of Alberta has, since 1999, engaged in a radical experiment. It has given classroom teachers the task and the opportunity to engage in teacher-led action research towards the goal of school improvement at the site of their work. The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) is a province-wide program built around teacher-directed research and involving hundreds of schools committed to improving student learning and performance through innovative site-based action research projects. Every school district across Alberta, a wide geographical area, participated.

I have been fortunate to be Director of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement at the University of Alberta since AISI's inception. Globally, no other initiative I know has partnered so systematically with teachers to engage site-based, action research towards the goal of student learning. At its essence, AISI requires that Alberta teachers articulate research at the grassroots and, by doing so, highlight the concerns, interests, and perspectives of the many stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, administrators, teachers) in their unique school community. True to the spirit of Kurt Lewin (1946), AISI supports the belief that teachers have the best insight into what must be improved within their own places of work and can be forces of change in those sites through their own action research.

As the Director of AISI for the University of Alberta, my work is to partner with teachers to rigorously promote school improvement through evidence-informed practice. AISI has sought to build upon a rigorous and well thought out model for conducting classroom research that would effect positive change at the sites where the research was conducted. However, what we didn't consider when AISI was built was that the process of researching would, in turn, radically advance the professional learning and academic growth of teachers. Leadership, efficacy, and agency grew as teachers engaged in action research and, through their researching, Percy's (1976) understanding of a triadic relationship – teachers, research knowledge, and research actions – came to fruition.

In writing this article, I make a small number of affirmations. First, I affirm that teachers come to their research as expert researchers – with or without the personal insight that they have been, and continue to be, researchers. Second, I have come to my own key insight about research: I believe conducting educational research is a process of both *knowledge-building* and *news-shaping*. Specifically, collectively and individually engaging in research inspires personal growth and the development of individuals and communities of learners.

2. AISI: Reshaping Research Methods for Teachers

The ideas from which this essay emerges are based upon twelve years of working side-by-side with teachers engaged in site-based action research. In addition, I have reviewed more than 2000 final reports (written by teachers in their own hands after three years of their site-based studies) and have written several articles and books based upon those studies (Parsons, McRae & Taylor, 2006; Parsons & Harding, 2010; Parsons & Beauchamp, 2012; Parsons, 2012) about the impact of site-based action research on “teachers as researchers.”

My findings suggest that teachers have ‘engaged agency’ in the Walker Percy sense. Specifically, I have seen the following changes in teachers’ capacity.

- 1) Their practice is more evidence-informed. As they have completed their own research, AISI teachers have engaged the work of other researchers and have adapted that work to their own needs. As a result, they no longer are subject to accepting the same hierarchical structure they have accepted before. They have not dismissed others’ work; ironically, they have engaged it more collegially and with more insight – sometimes even emailing other researchers to engage in email conversations about their collective work.
- 2) They are more willing to see themselves as leaders in their profession. Teachers have always been able to “look down” – to assume a leadership role in caring for the students in their individual classrooms; but, they have been less willing to “look out” – to see themselves as leaders in their school or their profession. One teacher commented that AISI has helped her be a better “school teacher” – by which, she meant, AISI encouraged her to take more responsibility for leadership throughout her school – beyond her classroom.

- 3) Teachers have become more literate. As they have engaged in site-based action research, they have been more active communicators – both verbally and in writing. These activities of literacy, and the preparation needed to complete them well, have helped them “practice speaking and writing,” which has encouraged increased literacy. Several teachers have noticed this growth and have noted aloud “I am becoming a better writer.”
- 4) These AISI teachers have come to share within and between schools. The findings of their research have become agendas for a wider sharing with other teachers. They now engage others in what might be seen as a “market” of ideas that they “trade” for and converse with the ideas of other teachers. They have become adept at creating professional learning communities of people who now engage first-hand (rather than second-hand) and have become stronger leaders and more professional learners because of it.
- 5) These AISI teachers have become sound researchers who can conduct studies and collect data that help them gain more professional insight. This work as fully engaged researchers has helped teachers professionalize their practice – with the concomitant changes that accompany this professionalization – including growth in language and vocabulary, increased insight, wider communication, and broader understanding. Teachers are becoming less fearful of reading and conducting research – and, they are growing more courageous as they engage further.
- 6) AISI teachers have become acknowledged by others as researchers – their professional status has improved. During the twelve-year life of AISI, the word “research,” originally *stolen* from the expert researcher vocabulary, has become part of the vocabulary of teachers and has come into common usage as the projects have matured. Teachers, during their first years of work, seldom named what they were doing as research nor identified themselves as researchers.
- 7) Finally, at the inception of most AISI projects in 1999, teachers were not seen as research experts – although these teachers were in fact undertaking action research projects on a daily basis in their own classrooms. This belief has changed. As well, the communication patterns of teachers have changed. Over twelve years, a broader and more active communicative pattern among teachers and, in fact, all those who inhabit the school and educational system emerged. Our findings (Beauchamp & Parsons, 2012) suggest that, when teachers talk powerfully with other teachers, good things happen.

The identification of teachers as researchers is not complicated; yet, it is an idea many teachers are struggling to embrace across Alberta. And, as teachers come to self-identify as researchers, they also have begun to engage in higher-level academic conversations and activities – almost as if they have graduated to a new way of thinking, talking, and acting. From my perspective working with these teachers, I believe their work has become more systematic and rigorous, their discourse has come to include “research vocabulary” and their pride of accomplishment and confidence has increased. They now seem more willing and naturally to embrace educational

leadership, borne on the belief that they “can make a difference in their school” and with the people with whom they work.

3. Walker Percy: Theorizing about Agency

In 1976, Walker Percy published the book *Message in the Bottle*. Percy’s work is not well known in education circles, but his ideas are worth considering. Born in 1916, Percy was almost anonymous until his mid-forties. He graduated from Columbia University’s medical school in 1941 and went to work at Bellevue Hospital in New York City. In 1942, 26-year-old Percy contracted tuberculosis and was restricted to a sanitarium. Isolated in the infirmary, for several years he had little to do but read and think. His isolation encouraged him to muse about things he once considered common. He recognized that what he thought were his own beliefs were, actually, society’s prescribed experiences. He grew convinced that, if humans were to have real experiences, these must be gained in radical first-hand ways.

Percy titled his work *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other*. Although his essays address topics in semiotics, Percy’s work can be read metaphorically as insights about action research and the triadic relationship conducting one’s own research can foster. By working to explain how language works (and I believe how research works), he works to create a middle ground between two dying modernist ideologies – Judeo-Christian ethics (grounded in individual freedom and responsibility) and modern science (whose rationalism and behaviorism posit humans as environmental organisms without freedom). Percy came to consider science a post-Darwinian simplistic activity that creates what Baudrillard (1994) calls *simulacrum* – where every representation was itself seen as a version of something else and keeps humans from engagement in first-hand experience.

4. Why Does Engagement in Research Matter to Teachers?

I see Walker Percy’s work as a way to explain why engagement in research can work to reshape teachers’ identities and embody their senses of agency. Percy’s works following his enlightenment period as he lay in the hospital included his 1954 essay “The Loss of the Creature.” This essay reflects directly upon his perspectives of what he calls the “packaged experiences” imposed by society.

“The Loss of the Creature” explores how an individual’s “objective” reality can be obscured and ultimately lost to systems of education and classification. Percy’s example is that the discovery of the Grand Canyon by García López de Cárdenas is quite different than seeing the Grand Canyon today. García López de Cárdenas was awed by the Grand Canyon; in contrast, modern-day sightseers see the Grand Canyon only through the lens of the symbolic complex already formed in their minds. Thus, sightseers do not appreciate the Grand Canyon on its own merits, but appreciate it based on how well it conforms to their pre-existing image of the Grand Canyon formed by the

mythology surrounding it. Instead of approaching the Grand Canyon directly, a visitor approaches it by taking photographs; which, Percy suggests, is not approaching it at all. These two processes – judging the site with postcards and pictures instead of confronting it – trap the *tourist* into subjugating the present to the past and to the future.

Similarly, a teacher who does not himself or herself engage in the personal process of fully researching an issue of personal importance and social significance only approaches research in a “packaged” way – through reading the “postcards” of others (reading other’s research) or through taking “photographs” (considering how others’ research makes sense in another context). However, engaging in site-based, action research is a process that helps teachers experience research directly. As Percy notes:

However it may come about, we notice two traits of the second situation [here we refer to the conduct of research]: (1) an openness of the thing before one – instead of being an exercise to be learned according to an approved mode, it is a garden of delights which beckons to one; (2) a sovereignty of the knower – instead of being a consumer of a prepared experience, I am a sovereign wayfarer, a wanderer in the neighborhood of being who stumbles into the garden (Percy, 1954, no pagination).

Percy suggests that a *layman* in modern society surrenders ownership to specialists, whom the layman believes has authority over him or her in his or her field (in this case, academic, expert researchers and the research they produce). The result is the creation of a research *caste system* between laymen and experts. For Percy, the worst thing about this system is that the layman never realizes what has been lost by accepting such *packaged* experiences. Perhaps, for Percy, these packaged experiences are most evident in graduate education. Instead of engaging teachers in personal action research, graduate education often transmits only itself [Paulo Freire’s (1996) banking concept of education]. As a result, teachers come not to view their education as either open or creative, nor do teachers view themselves as sovereign. Instead they are learning their *caste*. They are not agents of knowledge creation and, perhaps in an overstated way, never experience research in its fullness.

Much of the *caste* system of educational research is systemic: that is, select few are invited to participate fully in research. Others are asked to read the research of others as occasion to apply the knowledge gained from those others to personal situations. The research is only borrowed, never owned – never fully understood. The overall effect of this obfuscation by the structure of educational research goes hand in hand with a basic condition of modern society. In modern society, individuals are often reduced to consumers. For example, teachers who attend graduate classes in our Faculty of Education and attempt to understand classroom lectures or dialogue, can find themselves ignorant of the advanced or esoteric vocabulary; but, they also feel sheepish about engaging in conversations that would enlighten them. Lectures are filled with words and concepts they hear, yet do not understand; and, when they see others partake in advanced discourse with such facility, they come to believe these others completely understand. To escape personal embarrassment they remain silent – pretending to comprehend rather than asking questions or engaging in conversations that might bring light to what confounds them because

they believe that asking questions will unmask their ignorance and reveal them as imposters – posing as one who understands, yet does not.

Thus, through language learning and the act of discourse itself, teachers become social selves whose task is to package one's thinking in a process of self-affirmation as opposed to personal discovery. And, controlling language becomes important. Berger and Luckmann (1967) note that George Herbert Mead, a proponent of the social self, stressed the importance of language in the formation of the self. In an individualistic culture, which life in the academy seems currently to stress, one's task is to seek both self-affirmation and group-affirmation. It is easy to overlook the degree to which the self has been constructed by the influence of other.

While the individual self is never solely a self-constructed self, it is always to a greater or lesser extent a socially constructed self. In academia, we have taken this to a new high (or low) – almost constructing a naturalistic attraction to reject individual agency and responsibility. It is not just behaviorists or Darwinians. How many philosophical constructs, I ask rhetorically, have as their ground the loss of freedom, or the sense that *self* as a construct is fiction, or that the author matters not? Feminist thinkers seem to agree. Ross (1995: 335) notes: “The embodied self lives in a context of relationships. As with the category of embodiment, feminist theologians are critical of conceptions of the self which abstract from physical and social context.”

In the face of such packaged research, groups of teachers have become self-identified researchers. In our research (Parsons, Taylor & McRae, 2006), these teachers have been motivated in their work by three ideas: community, agency, and service. Although the idea of service as possibly trumping self-affirmation as a goal seems far-fetched, perhaps service can be partially reconsidered as service to the group of people with whom these teachers are working. Teachers, it seems, come to service as a vocational attribute. They are not alone, according to theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1944: 19).

Man (sic) is the kind of animal who cannot merely live. If he lives at all he is bound to seek the realization of his true nature; and to his true nature belongs his fulfillment in the lives of others. This will to live is thus trans-muted into the will to self-realization; and self-realization involves self-giving in relations to others. When this desire for self-realization is fully explored it becomes apparent that it is subject to the paradox that the highest form of self-realization is the consequence of self-giving, but that it cannot be the intended consequence without being prematurely limited.

5. Percy's Concept of Agency

Most interesting in Percy's work is his theorizing of “The Delta Factor” he frames from the story of Helen Keller's learning to say and sign the word *water* as Annie Sullivan (1) poured water over her hands and (2) repeatedly signed the word for water into her hand. Percy theorizes that the action was more than simple cause and effect (or intermittent conditioning) because Keller received both the signifier (the sign for *water*) and the referent (the water itself). What happened, Percy notes, was the creation of a triadic relationship between *water* (the word), water (the

liquid), and Helen herself – as a person acting with agency to bridge word and substance. These “three corners”—the Delta Δ – are, as Percy sees it, the “absolutely irreducible” building blocks for human intelligence. In Percy’s construction, Keller becomes more than organism responding to environment. She can now connect two unrelated things – (1) *water* the word and (2) water the liquid, and gains agency through doing so.

My point here is that, through this process of gaining agency, “water the liquid” becomes more than liquid because it connects both the substance (water), with the word (for water), with the identity of the human engaged in the activity (Helen, herself). To state it directly, research for teachers becomes more than data collecting and analyzing findings when it is connected to symbolic constructions (gaining agency and self-identifying as a researcher) that shape the lives and the identities of those making the constructions (doing the research). In other words, research (even scientific research) is always more than scientific, because it is conducted and constructed by people who are (by doing research) engaging in symbolic meaning-making and identity-building. Teachers are learning about themselves as they conduct the site-based action research. They are, in fact, becoming researchers who act as researchers act.

Thus, the methods of doing site-based action research (“water the word”) and the data or findings of research (“water the liquid”) shape teachers’ identities (as they are doing the research). Teacher research itself is much more than creating a methodological proposal for collecting data and then conducting it. It is a building block of human knowing and human identity forming where the whole of action research is greater than the sum of the parts. Specifically, as teachers came to conduct their own action research at their own sites, they came to identify as researchers – adding to their identities as teachers and school leaders –acting with agency in that space.

As an aside, although I will not discuss it in depth, I have seen this contestation between agents at work within the normative contexts housed in traditional research ethics forms that must be filled out prior to conducting research with human subjects. At many universities, the research ethics process is clearly grounded upon a traditional scientific ideology where knowledgeable researchers hold a hierarchical – almost patronizing – relationship with research subjects whom they promise not to harm. In contrast, my experiences is that site-based action research is conducted by trusting peers working collaboratively within the school community, most of whom would never consider advantage over colleagues as a status to be claimed because they all — together – have a vested interest in improving their places of engaged community learning and work. This does not delimit the insidious (and very human) potential for ambition and jealousy to impact an action research project; it does, however, suggest that in sites where the research is set within a trusting community of professionals, forces of change are often empowered.

An example of the potential for empowering forces to be released is in the formal ethics review procedures at our University where research may not be formally approved “at one’s site” when one holds any sort of implied status upon another – for example, a school administrator may not conduct site-based action research at her own school with her own teachers. In such a way, the academy controls who creates knowledge and what knowledge might be. What this system ignores, in a deeply cynical way, is the space of a specific school site where a community of teachers live, belong, and work together, perhaps with differing tasks, but without research hierarchies in effect.

Linking this understanding to the next section, teachers often begin as aliens to site-based action research. As Percy spins the metaphor, they are *castaways*. But, what has happened is that these *castaways* or *aliens* have come to consider themselves as *at home*. To build upon Percy's ideas, they have engaged in *good news* as they have experienced the triadic relationship of conducting research, understanding the findings of research, and seeing how that process has shaped their own understandings of who they are in the process. Percy is not alone in seeing this triad at work in how individuals shape their realities, or how the enmeshed individuals and realities mutually shape each other. Andrew Tallon (1997), for example, defines the human spirit as a "triune consciousness" — an integration of the operations of cognition, emotion, and volition. And, as Emile Benveniste (1971) notes, there is "consubstantiality" between thought and language.

6. Between News or Knowledge

To connect Percy's work with the experiences that have impacted our teachers, I build upon Percy's metaphor found in his essay "The Message in the Bottle." In this essay, for which the 1975 book was titled, Percy builds an extended metaphor of a castaway with amnesia. This castaway remembers nothing but what happens on the island he washes up on. As he walks the beach, the castaway finds bottles with one-sentence messages inside: "There is fresh water in the next cove," "The British navy once ruled the world," or "Lead melts at 330 degrees."

A group of scientists, who also live on the island, separate these messages into two categories: empirical facts and analytic facts. But, for the castaway, this classification fails to account for the messages' impact on him — as the message reader. So, the castaway creates two categories of his own: (1) knowledge and (2) news. Scientists, committed to objectivity, do not recognize differences between these categories. But, for teachers, whose lives are at least in part always subjective, there is a huge difference.

Research for teachers remains knowledge when it remains shaped by the dyadic relationships between signifier (learning the language of research) and referent (doing the research work itself); however, that relationship will (and has for teachers) become triadic as researchers themselves are shaped by their work and expand in agency and identity as a result of their work's impact as *news* on their personal lives. In other words, teachers who have done site-based action research became aware and in tune with (1) the impact for positive change that research, done well, can bring to a site and (2) their own abilities to actually make positive changes at their own sites as they were motivated to do so because they were engaged in service through their research.

News, getting back to Percy, is verified differently than knowledge. Knowledge is verified empirically; news is verified empirically only after the person has already "heeded its call." One important consideration for any *castaway* (including teachers, many of whom had years earlier entered teaching to "make a difference" in the lives of children) is the decision to attend to that piece of *news* or to ignore that *news*. For teachers, who had earlier "heeded the call" to the vocation of teaching, the engagement in site-based action research was a re-energizing of their commitment to teaching as a vocation in both a pragmatic and advanced theoretical manner.

In “The Message in the Bottle,” Percy sets three criteria for accepting a piece of news: (a) its relevance to the hearer’s predicament; (b) the trustworthiness of the news bringer; and (c) its likelihood or possibility. That possibility being, as Heidegger notes, an *existential* one has freedom to choose. This, in some ways, matches Heidegger’s (1962) view of *existentials* in *Being and Time*. Some *existentials* that emerged from Heidegger’s “existential analytic” were possibility, care, discourse, understanding (interpretation), etc. Because news depends heavily on the news bearer’s trustworthiness, any ‘found message’ is contingent for a *castaway*, who must also know something about the person who wrote the news.

Finally, Percy notes that the problem with the society he experiences is that people attempt to cure feelings of homelessness (of being a castaway) by seeking knowledge from science and art (Percy suggests similarities between science and art in this sense, though one could argue Percy’s epistemological implosions). The real human problem, to Percy, is that homelessness comes from being stranded on the island without an ability to receive news from others. Hence, the soul-less research of many teachers who move through the motions of reading others’ research without either energizing or being energized by a community or a first-hand, and deeply-engaged experience of researching.

7. Conclusion

The genesis of this article was my curiosity about how motivating the engagement of research was to teachers who, through their work, attempted to metabolize school sites and edify school culture. My synthesis of AISI teacher research findings and my work with AISI teachers encourages me to conclude that teachers could and should engage in site-based action research for two reasons: first, they will gain knowledge that helps students learn; second, they will gain the *news* that they can become powerful agents of change within the sites of their work.

My synthesis of AISI teacher research suggests that teachers gained agency when they designed, conducted, and reported their AISI research. This agency included establishing a site-based research community; thus, research was conducted by individuals and communities motivated by the belief that they “could make a difference” where they lived and worked. And, they did make a difference as they created knowledge and used that knowledge to actively engage positive change. This research – knowledge – change process energized school leaders. Finally, I conclude that good work (work in the service of student learning) is highly motivating, helps build positive relationships, and shows teachers for what they are – people who like kids and want to help.

Throughout my engagement with twelve years of AISI research, I have seen teachers come to believe and act upon research as a fundamental human activity embedded in their practice. AISI continues to engage opportunities for teacher growth in leadership and presents practical opportunities to improve schools and increase student learning. My personal assessment of AISI is that gaining agency as a researcher is a creatively empowering activity of the experience for teachers.

I have come to see research as a key to empowering and generating educational growth and insight. I believe that research, in all its manifest forms, holds great promise for teachers as educational leaders. Findings from the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) clearly illustrate that research is something teachers can and should do and something that shapes their identities. It is, as Percy notes, good *news* that shapes teachers' identities, lives, and work.

The concepts inherent to site-based action research are simple and natural, but they are not ideas readily embraced within the teaching profession. Somehow, we have accepted the belief that classroom teachers are not research experts, even though they undertake action research projects every day – i.e., they are *only* teachers. In AISI, we have found that action research is a key to empowering and generating educational growth and insight. I believe the activity of site-based action research has engendered tremendous growth in teacher agency and to re-invigorate school communities.

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