

From reluctance to empowerment

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This month, I invite you to dip into a paper that brings to the reader a very familiar character: a reluctant teacher!

If you are among those who likes (even loves) teaching, surely you agree that you are in the minority in our country? Most people who become teachers in India do so for reasons other than *wanting to teach* – from it being a convenient choice (for the timings and vacations that it offers) to teacher-recruitment not being as demanding as several other professions.

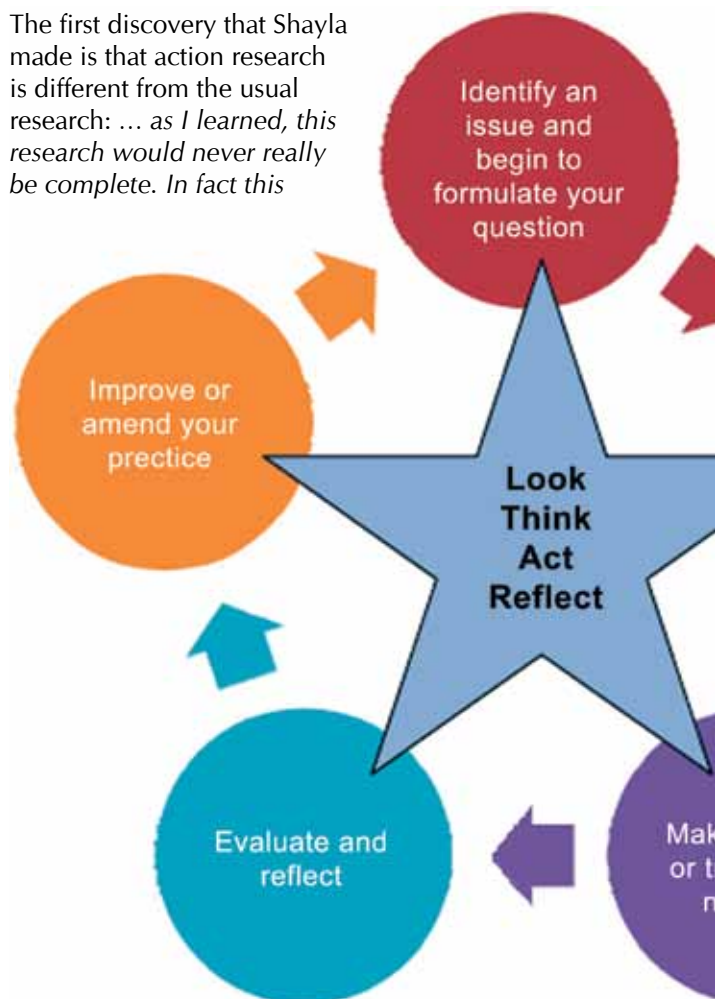
Whether you agree or not with this premise, you will surely find this story – of a reluctant teacher-researcher turning into an empowered one – an absorbing read. This (freely downloadable) paper describes the journey of Shayla – a graduate student and also a teacher in her second year of teaching – as she takes a course on Action Research offered by Jennifer, a former teacher and her Professor.

I love the honesty with which Shayla first notes in her diary: *Yet another role, another hat to wear on a daily basis. I am now to wear the hat of a researcher. Nurse, educator, parent, comforter, encourager, etc. My hat pile is getting high. First as a mother and wife, next as an elementary public school teacher to 23 third graders, and now as a researcher. Action researcher to be exact. The reason for the new hat you may ask? No, I am not an avid collector. I am, however, a student at a state university in the Southeast working towards a Master's degree in*

educational research who is about to embark on a semester long course on action research.

Resonates, doesn't it? I could immediately connect to these (opening) lines of the paper. Who wouldn't sigh when yet another expectation was dropped onto one's head? But as the paper goes on, it becomes amply clear (from the excerpts taken out of both the teacher-researcher's as well as her professor's journal) that *both of them* were empowered through their journey together. What's more, so were her students and even their parents!

The first discovery that Shayla made is that action research is different from the usual research: ... *as I learned, this research would never really be complete. In fact this*



From Reluctant Teacher to Empowered Teacher-Researcher One Educator's Journey toward Action Research by **Jennifer Esposito & Shayla Smith**

Source: Teacher Education Quarterly, Vol. 33, No. 3, Action Research for Teacher Empowerment and Transformation (Summer 2006), pp. 45-60.

particular research did not just lead to me earning three credit hours and being one step closer to graduation. It also did something far greater and out of the ordinary. It empowered me.

Jennifer (Shyla's teacher) required her students to keep a reflective journal, where they had to make a minimum of three entries per week. She divided her class into groups of five, so that they could confer with each other and work better. Predictably, this was initially met with resistance but later valued greatly as one of the best parts of the course: *When we were divided into groups of five, I'm sure we all felt the same initial horror: not another group project. Actually, the research group was designed to be that of a support group. There was a block of time every class meeting for us to meet and discuss any relevant details that pertained to the class or our research project. Generally we discussed educational issues as they related to our research. The research groups were one of the best components of the class because it allowed us to feed off one another for creative ideas. We also got to ask/answer one another's questions.*

The main requirement of the course was to complete one action research project.

Shayla's first step – as always in Action Research – was to identify the problem that she wished to address. Where did she dearly wish to effect a change? She found it easy to draw up a list of problems – as who wouldn't?

Find out more about the issue: read, research, reflect

As she thought about the typical issues that her students struggled with, she zeroed in on their main obstacle: reading. She was clueless about the HOW, of course! All she knew was that this was definitely a problem that she wanted to crack. As Shayla wondered if and how their reading levels would impact her students, Jennifer guided her students through a LOOK-THINK-ACT cycle of Action Research.

Jennifer deftly steered her students away from the natural tendency to jump to strategies, before they took stock of the problem that they had identified. She nudged them to gather enough information about it from the entire school community. As Shayla did the reading that her project

Now bring it into the classroom!

1. What are your students struggling with?
2. Which of these is an issue you wish to tackle right away?
3. Can you find out more about this particular issue? *Where exactly* is the issue? (For example, in the above paper, as Shayla interviewed her students she probed deeper into their resistance to reading and then devised ways of addressing it.)
4. Who else feels that this is an issue worth tackling? Students/their parents? Your colleagues?
5. Can you rope some (or all) of these people into your action research?
6. How will you know that the identified issue has indeed been tackled to some extent?
7. What are some ways of gathering evidence for these shifts?
8. What are the ways in which you can offer.
 - a. choice,
 - b. opportunity and
 - c. extrinsic motivation to your students?
9. Try these out, with the collaborators that you identified in 4 above.

Send in your findings to
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demanded, she found that Anderson (2001) had conducted a study at the end of which *library circulation more than doubled and students read for pleasure and recommended books to one another*. Here was a tangible outcome that Shayla could pitch for! Especially as her candid interviews with third graders (mostly African-American with one Hispanic, one Asian and one Indian) showed only too clearly that there was a great need for less punitive action and more motivation.

I especially loved the way her students encouraged their peers during the project, egging them to read more with encouragements like: *"You're almost there,"* or even reading together. It made me wonder whether Shayla's own experience with her own peers made her encourage a similar strategy with her students. Pretty soon, the same students who had been reluctant readers began to view the 'Accelerated Reading challenge' that their teacher

Music and Artificial Intelligence

Ullas



This article series, in four parts, will address the various dimensions of music; as an experience via its various art forms, as auditory and visual perceptions via the science behind it, and then attempt to bring together what a child learns in K12 as the science of sound, the physics and math of it, to pursue a career in sound production, become a musician, or simply, an ardent music lover, by understanding the intricate forms of sound.

Since time immemorial, sound has been a key source of communication within nature. Birds, bees, whistle of the foliage, thunder, the whisper of air, dolphins speaking under water and many more such forms and shapes of sound are some of the visible examples created by nature, with well-defined purposes.

If one were to meander through a dense, human uninhabited forestland, and tip toe in silence, the various forms of the above sounds can be experienced in its raw form, and is a fascinating

posed as an extra-curricular activity. They started reading *"at lunch, after school, and during their free time at school."* Through this project, Shayla came up with a variety of ways to motivate students to read and realized that the onus is on the teacher to kick-start such reinforcements. She discovered that students need choice, opportunity and extrinsic motivation in order to take up the challenge of Accelerated Reading.

At the end of the project, not only did she produce a bunch of enthusiastic readers in the third grade, her own thinking became clearer – even as new questions were generated for further action research! She became a more empowered teacher (if you recall, this was just her second year of teaching) and she also shared her findings with her colleagues and the school community.

Most of the teacher-researchers who took Jennifer's course left it *firmly stating that they would continue to complete action research, even after their course grades had been turned in!*

A very inspiring read: do dip into it!

Reference: Anderson, J. (2001). What works: A skeptic is sold. *School Library Journal*, (July), 3.

The author is Founder Director of Thinking Teacher (www.thinkingteacher.in), an organization that networks with teachers across the country. Thinking Teacher aims to awaken and nurture the reflective practitioner within each teacher. By taking (action) research out of the classroom, Thinking Teacher develops the (action) researcher in the teacher. And then, by bringing research into the classroom – as in this series – Thinking Teacher's goal is to help build deep inquiry and rich learning into the teaching process. The author can be reached at [<neeraja@thinkingteacher.in>](mailto:neeraja@thinkingteacher.in).