



# Learning While Teaching: The Dynamics of Action Research

BY AMY CLARK AND LISA BIRNO

In a time in education that is driven by testing and mandated curriculum and when teachers often feel isolated and alone, one of the most freeing endeavors teachers can embark upon is their own action research. This sounds ludicrous, right? After all, most of us were done with research when we ceased being students and began acting as teachers. We assign the research and we grade it; we don't often attempt to conduct it. So how can something like action research be empowering?

And yet, at its heart, action research is all about learning. As the Center for Collaborative Action Research at Pepperdine University describes, action research is a “process of deep inquiry into one’s practices.” No one told us this should be the driving force in our teaching. We didn’t know that by studying our own practices from the stance of a learner, we’d create the most powerful experiences in our careers.

Action research is teacher driven and student centered. No one is better equipped to deeply understand, and therefore research, what children and teachers are experiencing in the classroom than teachers, principals, and instructional coaches. And when we choose to look that understanding square in the

eyes, we see the true needs of our kids and our colleagues and the problems of practice we face.

This moment, these observations are the impetus behind the action research project. We don’t have to wait for our school administrators to tell us what to do. We can begin discovering new knowledge and uncovering deeper understanding of our students, our colleagues, and ourselves as educators. We can do our own research, and our students can witness our learning process just as we escort them through theirs. In doing so, inquiry drives the learning, and the learning is modeled and becomes reciprocal and even more valuable than before.

Our experience as Heinemann Fellows allowed us to explore our problems of practice. It pushed us to face challenges, establish questions that would compel us to examine our students’ experiences, and ultimately attempt to create powerful change driven by our students’ or colleagues’ responses and experiences. This learning was even more compelling as we worked together. Our process was iterative. Each time we talked or met, we reflected on our practices, created new action based on this reflection, and continued our work. This reflective process

became the embodiment of how to continuously improve our practice. Both of us pursuing our own problem of practice and yet connected through the process. Both of us willing listeners for the others while also acting as a sounding board—and often a coach—as we delved into our problems of practice.

Although our experience as Heinemann Fellows had a powerful effect on us as teachers, we ultimately found that it doesn't require becoming a Heinemann Fellow to pursue this kind of experience. Action research is not just for some; it is for all educators. It can feel intimidating—learning has that effect on people. Questions arise. How on earth do I figure this out? What next? What if I mess it up? Research isn't always neat and it isn't always easy, but action research in our classrooms is always worth the struggle. To ease the questions and allay the concerns, seek out a thought partner to be your research



Turn the page to review their research questions and the summaries of their new insights.

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companion (and sometimes research therapist because, let's face it, sometimes things will not go the way you plan). Choose someone equally committed to education and also enthused to take on his or her own action research project. This partner does not need to teach the same grade or subject—the partner doesn't even need to be in the same building! Goodness, not only do we (Lisa and Amy) teach completely different grade levels, but we also live separated by several states. And, honestly, we found that each other's perspective on our work was invaluable. We challenged and encouraged each other; we were able to share insights that we were too close to recognize; we listened, and we tried to respond honestly. Even when we felt entirely alone in our

work settings, we knew our thought partner was always ready to listen, to help, to share in successes, and to see us through our less-than-shining moments. There is a freedom in being in charge of our own research. There is a freedom in knowing we are not alone in this. There is empowerment in discovering our own voices as educators.

As you read the short descriptions on the following pages about the 2016–2018 Heinemann Fellows' research, lingering questions, and insights born of challenging and important discussion throughout their two years, think about how you might find a colleague or two and launch your own action research; it's the most powerful work you'll ever do.



**Amy Clark** is Head of the High School Division and an English teacher at Christ Episcopal School in Covington, LA. Amy is a member of the inaugural 2014–2016 Heinemann Fellows, when her action research question was, “In what ways does the study and composition of poetry impact other modes of student writing; in particular, narrative and scholarly essay writing?” Follow Amy on Twitter @AmyGClark.



**Lisa Birno** is an Instructional Excellence Coordinator in the Eden Prairie School system in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, where she was formally a sixth-grade teacher and instructional coach. Lisa was also a member of the 2014–2016 Heinemann Fellows.

Her action research question as a Heinemann Fellow was, “What instructional strategies are most effective in promoting equitable and engaged talk in a self-contained classroom?” Follow Lisa on Twitter @LisaBirno.



**KATIE CHARNER-LAIRD** @CharnerLaird  
Principal, Cambridgeport School,  
Cambridge, MA

**RESEARCH QUESTION:** What is the impact on student engagement, agency, and achievement in math when a principal brings her own questions, wonderings, and explorations about

student engagement and agency in math to all of her work with teachers, students, and families?

*The Heinemann Fellowship has allowed me to bring curiosity and enthusiasm about math learning into my work as a school leader. My questions have led me into the classroom alongside teachers to deepen my own understanding of how children's mathematical ideas develop. Perhaps the most exciting outcome for my school is that we are now on a journey to becoming a place of joyful, enthusiastic math learning for all children and adults.*



**TRICIA EBARVIA** @TriciaEbarvia  
English Teacher, Conestoga High School,  
Berwyn, PA

**RESEARCH QUESTION:** What elementary- or middle school-level literacy practices can secondary English teachers use to develop adolescent literacy?

*Although I'm a secondary English teacher, the greatest professional growth I've experienced began with an inquiry into elementary classrooms. Inspired by the K-5 best practices I observed, I shifted my focus away from teaching particular texts to teaching reading and cultivating readers. My inquiry has since evolved to synthesize reader response and critical literacy—to help adolescents reflect on their multiple identities and how these identities inform their reading of texts, themselves, and the world.*



**IAN FLEISHER**  
Sixth-Grade Math Teacher, Portsmouth Middle  
School, Portsmouth, NH

**RESEARCH QUESTION:** In what ways can the routine use of visuals offer all learners equal access to math concepts and conversations and ignite increased engagement and enjoyment in their own mathematical identities?

*The Heinemann Fellowship has provided an invigorating learning community and so much more. Ellin Keene, my fellow Fellows, and the Heinemann team have challenged and inspired me as I've made a big turn from my lifelong focus on literacy to a deep dive into the world of math and an exploration of ways visual tools might reshape our teaching and increase students' engagement.*



**KATE FLOWERS**  
English Teacher, Santa Clara High School, Santa Clara, CA

**RESEARCH QUESTION:** What accountability measures for independent reading promote reflection, motivation, and the growth of a robust reading habit in young adult readers?

*My research and writing explored creating a student-centered high school English classroom that leverages choice to connect students to books, writing, and each other in ways that feed their spirits and minds. With the support of the Fellows and the Heinemann team, always a call or an e-mail away, I made shifts that allow my students to read and write their lives. Now, I am guide, coach, counselor, cheerleader, and sounding board.*



**KENT HAINES** @KentHaines  
Seventh- and Eighth-Grade Math Teacher,  
Simmons Middle School, Hoover, AL

**RESEARCH QUESTION:** In what ways can a relational approach to teaching algebraic expressions and equations help students to reason abstractly and quantitatively with them?

*I have researched tasks that help students make connections between algebraic expressions and other representations, such as number lines, bar diagrams, and real-world scenarios. I have found that these tasks promote debate and conceptual thinking in ways that most students don't use when solving equations or simplifying expressions. Most interestingly, I have found that a variety of representations is more beneficial to student achievement than any single representation.*



**CHRIS HALL** @CHallTeacher  
Teacher, Oyster River Middle School,  
Durham, NH

**RESEARCH QUESTION:** What instructional approaches are most effective in developing a culture of revision? How might this culture of revision improve student writing, students' perception of writing, and students' agency toward writing?

*The fellowship has left me energized in powerful, lasting ways. Over the past two years, I've researched ways to develop a "culture of revision" for intermediate-grade writers—how teachers can help spark revision with modest changes in our writing feedback, conferring language, and student reflection strategies. It's been a joy and honor working with the Fellows—an amazingly thoughtful, inspiring group of educators.*



**AERIALE JOHNSON** @ArcticleTeach  
Kindergarten Teacher, Washington Elementary,  
San Jose, CA

**RESEARCH QUESTION:** What are the optimal early childhood classroom conditions needed to promote oral language acquisition and development and depth of thought that, consequently, enhance the growth of literacy skills?

*As an educator of children who experience word poverty, I began this research determined to empower them with words. This journey taught me that, to do so, I must embrace my silence. When adults truly listen, we develop the kind of empathy necessary to humble ourselves in children's presence, to take our proper place. Our work must never be about saving children; it must be about living in the gap . . . right beside them.*

@kate\_flowers



**ANNA OSBORN** @AnnaOz249  
Reading Specialist, Jefferson Middle School,  
Columbia, MO

**RESEARCH QUESTION:** In what ways does the exploration of personal identity through reading and discourse impact students' perceptions of themselves as stigmatized readers?

*Throughout my action research, I worked with middle school students to explore labels put on them as readers ("struggling," "resistant"). We worked to replace feelings such as hurt, fear, and trepidation with new reading identities that included confidence and risk-taking. And as the research unfolded, I was struck by how my role as a researcher was an authentic parallel to my students' learning. It gave me new appreciation for the phrase "lifelong learner."*



**HOLLIS SCOTT** @HollisWSScott  
Fifth-Grade Teacher, Montair Elementary  
School, Danville, CA

**RESEARCH QUESTION:** In what ways does teaching students to be metacognitive through visible thinking routines increase engagement and independence in fiction reading?

*My research has focused on making thinking visible in the classroom—valuing not just what students think but nurturing an awareness of how they think when engaging in learning. When students use thinking routines, they become more metacognitive and strategic. In turn, I am awed by what children reveal when they know their ideas matter and when they are given opportunities to grow thinking together. My close observations of these moments guide my teaching.*



**KIMBERLY PARKER** @TchKimPossible  
English Teacher, Writing Instructor, and  
Curriculum Consultant, Boston and  
Cambridge, MA

**RESEARCH QUESTION:** In what ways does participation in a community literacy group impact members' self-advocacy and teacher activism and serve as a site of resistance to "traditional" narratives about black people's literacy practices?

*As a Heinemann Fellow, I documented how I detracked my English language arts classrooms to provide transformative literacy opportunities to underserved young people of color. I've moved into community literacy activism, where excellence is possible through the development of community book clubs, the creation of a canon of literature for black children and youth, and the successful first annual Literacy Is Liberation conference, in collaboration with a broad network of educators, parents, students, and community members.*



**TIANA SILVAS** @TianaSilvas  
Fifth-Grade Teacher, PS 59,  
New York, NY

**RESEARCH QUESTION:** In what ways can upper elementary teachers identify and capitalize on students' "natural genre" in writing to increase agency?

*My Heinemann Fellows work has been eye-opening and rewarding. My question led me to create space for students to take risks and tell their truths through the power of writing. Additionally, support from other Fellows offered insight and encouraged me to take action toward a more just world. I have rediscovered myself as an educator and have the needed courage to study and speak out. My journey continues.*

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*Left to right standing: Brian J. Melton, Janelle W. Henderson, Nicole Stellan O'Donnell, Marian Dingle, Nina Sudnick, Minjung Pai. Left to right seated: Irene Castellón, Julie Kwon Jee, Julia E. Torres, David Rockower, Islah Tauheed.*