



The Teacher as Learner: THE RESEARCH OF DONALD GRAVES

By Mary Ellen Giacobbe



ATKINSON ACADEMY HAS ALWAYS BEEN A WELCOMING PLACE. IN 1791, FOUR YEARS AFTER IT WAS BUILT, ATKINSON ACADEMY WELCOMED FEMALE STUDENTS AND BECAME ONLY THE SECOND COEDUCATIONAL SCHOOL IN OUR COUNTRY. IN 1978, ALMOST TWO HUNDRED YEARS LATER, PRINCIPAL JEAN ROBBINS WELCOMED RESEARCHERS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE, WHO CAME TO STUDY SIX- TO NINE-YEAR-OLDS' WRITING. FOR TWO YEARS, FOUR MORNINGS A WEEK, DONALD GRAVES, LUCY CALKINS, AND SUSAN SOWERS TRAVELED TO OUR WHITE CLAPBOARD SCHOOL TO PERFORM GROUNDBREAKING RESEARCH THAT WOULD SHAPE CHILD-CENTERED APPROACHES TO LITERACY LEARNING FOR DECADES.

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I was in the midst of preparing for my ninth year of teaching first grade when I learned about the researchers' plans. I assumed that there wouldn't be much to look at in my classroom, except possibly handwriting, because I took dictation and did all the writing. Looking back, I realize that I had such a narrow definition of writing.

The research team, as it turns out, was headed for first grade. I kicked off the year as I had in years past with a field trip to the apple orchard. When we returned, the children drew pictures about our trip. I encouraged them to write, but I was determined that they spell words correctly, so we generated a word bank, a list of apple orchard and fall words they might need. Amy, with curly, chestnut-colored hair piled high on her head, chose a large piece of picture story paper and began drawing trees loaded with apples, along with pumpkins on the ground, and added herself and as many of her classmates as she could squeeze onto the paper. Then she wrote:

<i>pumpkins</i>	<i>doughnuts</i>	<i>wagon</i>	<i>squirrels</i>
<i>frost</i>	<i>apple cider</i>	<i>apple tree</i>	<i>fall</i>

There was a sparkle in her eyes as she talked about her illustration, but the light quickly faded as she struggled to read her written words. And no wonder—her writing was so different from the language she used when talking about her drawing. I was disappointed in her work.

At lunchtime, I slid her paper across the table to Don and said, "Look at this. Why is Amy doing this?"

He studied her work for several minutes before responding, "This is so interesting." He talked about and celebrated all that Amy *could* do, and then asked, "What do you think she's doing? What do you notice?"

What an impact that conversation had. I was disappointed with Amy's attempt, but then I realized that Amy's writing simply aped the spelling list I had provided. I wanted words spelled correctly, and so that became her goal. She had done what I asked. But Don had been amazed and filled with wonder by it. He noticed and celebrated what Amy could do. Then, in asking me what I noticed, he showed his belief in me as a teacher to make sense of Amy's work and to plan appropriate instruction. I knew then that if I wanted my students to become writers, I needed to rethink what I was asking them to do.

For two years, Don and his associates observed our students in the act of writing. We spent recesses and lunchtimes going over the morning's work, looking at videotapes, discussing individual and group writing conference as well as whole-class sharing times. Don was never the evaluator of the writing and teaching but instead the observer who tried to make sense of what he was seeing. And he was amazed by the children's work. By not looking at what "should be," he looked at what "was."

Don led me to ask questions of myself. What would happen if I didn't provide word banks and instead asked children to write words based upon the sounds they heard? What would happen if I didn't teach all the letters and sounds before they started writing but instead let each child begin with what he knew and I taught what he needed to know as he wrote? What would happen if I provided materials to make booklets for the stories they told instead of single pieces of paper? What would happen if, after they were satisfied with a piece of writing, I became the children's editor and typed their stories for our classroom library?

One of the most important things I learned from Don was that I could experiment and conduct research in my classroom. I learned that a teacher never has all the answers. The learner's needs change, classes change, and expectations change, leading to new questions. Seeing myself as a learner gave me the energy to make my teaching worthwhile. Without Don in my classroom, I would not have experienced the depth and breadth that teaching and learning can be. Don Graves honored and valued the true sense of our profession.

Mary Ellen Giacobbe is a literacy consultant who designs and leads classroom-based inservice PD for teachers and administrators. Her professional development work includes demonstrating methods of teaching writing, leading discussions in response to demonstrations, and presenting information on teaching writing, creating a workshop environment, conferring with students, mini-lessons, and how student writing informs instruction.



During her career, Mary Ellen consulted with the Literacy Collaborative at Lesley College in Cambridge, MA. Mary Ellen was a co-director and designer (with Martha Horn) of "Writing in Kindergarten," a professional development project in the Boston, MA Public Schools. Their coauthored book, *Talking, Drawing, Writing: Lessons for Our Youngest Writers* is based on that work.

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