

Action Research: Impacting Results

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US History at Liberty

As the school year was about to begin, the 11th grade US history team at Liberty Secondary School met to outline the year's expectations.

"Every junior needs to complete a research paper this year," Janet Diamond, the team leader, informed the group. Janet was an experienced teacher who was also enrolled in a doctoral program at a nearby university.

"I understand the need to have students complete a research paper," replied John Alisin, a relatively new member of the department, "but so many of our kids come to us lacking basic research and writing skills and to have to teach this on top of all of the content assessed on the state exam is daunting, to say the least."

A third teacher, Eileen McGoran chimed in, "As difficult and time consuming as it can be to teach kids how to conduct research and write a research paper, these are essential skills and they are too valuable to dismiss." She continued, "This is a pacing dilemma and the real question is how do we continue to teach the required content *and* reinforce the necessary research and writing skills that all students should acquire in high school?"

"Well," answered Janet, glancing down at the papers in front of her, "That's the question of the school year, but really," she paused and took a breath, "I believe that if we combine our talents and take a few extra hours here and there devoted to answering that very question, we may just find a way to make it all work."

Janet had come to the conclusion that time, indeed, was the critical factor. Inspired to find a way, to carve out some extra time to work with her colleagues, Janet had applied for a grant from the National Education Association (NEA) six months earlier. When she learned that the NEA had approved her proposal, she excitedly announced to her colleagues, "We got the grant! Now we have money to cover the cost of substitutes so we can meet during the school day. We can conduct action research on how to support our students' research and writing skills. This way we can coordinate our efforts to improve their skills and, ultimately, student achievement." In fact, she had received enough money to put together an action research team of 13 teachers who taught not only 11th grade, but 9th, 10th, and 12th grades as well.

At the first department meeting, Janet announced her plan to develop grade-level writing goals and objectives that would build on each other in an effort to improve student achievement through the reinforcement of research and writing skills. She was, however, met with mixed reactions. Some colleagues asked to participate immediately.

"This is a great idea," exclaimed Bob, a 9th grade world history teacher. "Count me in."

Mike Jones, a 12th grade government teacher, asked, "As a first year teacher, I would appreciate some guidance and support as I tackle my first research paper assignment. May I join?"

Janet realized that filling the first ten slots was fairly easy, but the last three proved more challenging.

Doris Fisher spoke up, "Look, writing is the domain of the English teachers. We have enough to do in order to teach the content to our students."

Janet countered, "The point of this grant is to provide time for teachers and, let's face it, all teachers should be teaching some form of writing. More importantly, I think we can find a

way to make teaching writing more manageable for teachers and more meaningful for students if we had large chunks of time where we could meet and focus."

It took some convincing, but Janet was able to find enough teachers to participate, although she quickly learned that a number of teachers shared Doris' beliefs about writing. Undeterred, Janet looked forward to leading a promising research study. "Doing this action research will help my teammates realize that all teachers should be teaching some form of writing," she thought to herself.

The Team

Despite the initial negative responses about teaching writing, Janet pressed ahead with a dedicated team of teachers who were willing to work together to help students improve not only their research and writing skills, but also their content knowledge. Janet was joined by two 9th grade World History I teachers, four 10th grade World History II teachers, five 11th grade US History teachers, and two 12th grade US Government teachers. This group had a variety of experience, and included two novice teachers, three teachers with backgrounds in special education, and most with master's degrees in the social sciences. Combined, the action research group had over a century of classroom teaching experience.

Liberty Secondary School

Liberty Secondary School was located in the suburbs of a major east coast city and had approximately 4,000 students in grades 7-12, with 2,800 enrolled in the high school. The student body was somewhat diverse. Approximately 63% white students, 17% Asian, 9% Hispanic, 6% African-American, with various other ethnicities represented in the remaining 5% of the students. Only 8% of students received free or reduced lunches, indicating a community of high socioeconomic status. One administrator estimated that at least 75% of Liberty's parents attended a four-year college. The student population was fairly static, with an estimated 9% degree of transience.

The school served the entire spectrum of student abilities within a variety of educational programs; students had the opportunity to take classes in the International Baccalaureate (IB) and Advanced Placement (AP) programs, while also finding support in the English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and special education programs. There were 241 students involved in the ESOL program and 395 students in special education in the high school.

The Students

It was the first day of school, and Janet greeted her high school students at the door. She did an opening, "getting to know you" activity, and gave them an overview of what would occur in her class that year. Upon completion of the activity, the students and Janet engaged in a dialogue.

Matt, one of Janet's students, commented, "Miss Diamond, is it true that we have to write a research paper in history class this year?"

Janet replied, "Why yes, each of you will write a research paper on a history topic that you find interesting. You get to choose your topic, and I will walk you through the steps of conducting your research and writing your paper. The key to remember is that this is a learning process, and I am here to help you every step of the way."

Maria was shocked. "Writing in history class?! I'm not sure I am into this!" Ms. Diamond enthusiastically responded, "Writing is an integral part of history, and my goal is to

give you the confidence to embrace writing and research whenever you encounter it! Trust me, when we are finished you will see writing a research paper is not so intimidating. My colleagues and I have broken down the steps to the process so you won't find it as difficult as you may think it is."

The bell rang, and Janet sensed that the majority of her students had reservations about this research paper. Nonetheless, they had accepted the reality of using their writing skills in history class.

Taking that First Step

Exhausted after the first day of working with her students, Janet sat down to reflect on the day and the direction the action research she had undertaken with colleagues would go. She questioned herself, "Why are we doing this action research and what positive outcomes will it have for the students? Will I be able to get the kids to buy into the research writing process for a history course?"

She reviewed her action research question: "To what extent does coordinated instruction in research and writing improve both students' mastery of the research process and student achievement in writing as measured by a teacher-created rubric?" Janet realized that she and her colleagues had undertaken a considerable task on top of their regular teaching duties for which they would not receive additional pay. She was driven by her passion for history and her belief that all students should be skilled in the steps of research and writing. She knew that she was collaborating with some very dedicated teachers who also wanted to help students become successful and life-long learners. Completing an action research study such as this would help the teachers assist their students to acquire critical thinking skills that they would use throughout their lives. In addition, she knew her team was developing an approach to teach and assess research and writing skills that would streamline the process for both students and teachers.

Making Progress

Weeks into the semester, Janet and her colleagues were seeing positive results and receiving constructive feedback from their students as they went through the step-by-step research and writing process with the students. Students were being monitored with a list of checkpoints and were well into their research topics. She and the teachers even created lesson plans and student guide sheets for each step of the research and writing process, but their true innovation was a clear and focused rubric specific to the history research criteria they established to guide and assess students' final products. Janet realized that this was a very empowering experience for the teachers and the students.

She thought to herself that if only others could see how valuable this is then maybe funding could be built into our district for action research so teachers would be paid to do this additional work on top of their regular salary. Wouldn't it be wonderful, she thought to herself, if teachers got time built into their schedules to collaborate on a regular basis and conduct action research? Keep it focused, she reminded herself, one step at a time.

Later that week, Janet overheard a conversation between two English teachers:

"Did you hear what Janet is having them do in history?" asked Alice Sevorez, a 10th grade English teacher.

"I think it's great. Another discipline is reinforcing writing skills!" exclaimed Kim Simone, an 11th grade English teacher.

Janet decided that, despite previously unsuccessful attempts to collaborate with her English colleagues, she would invite them to sit down in a few weeks with her team of history teachers and discuss ways in which the two departments could collaborate and, ultimately, capitalize on the strengths of two complementary disciplines.

“Hi, I couldn’t help overhearing your conversation. Would you be interested in getting our departments together to talk about how we could work together to improve the students’ writing skills?” she asked Alice and Kim in the lunchroom.

The two teachers turned to Janet with curiosity and responded to Janet’s invitation with the following questions:

“How are you finding the time to do this? Are you getting paid to do this extra work? How do you teachers find the time or get subs to cover these classes when we barely have time to meet as a department. How are you getting this all to work?”

Janet was actually happy to hear that the teachers were so interested and had so many questions. She explained that she took the initiative to write several grants to receive funding to pay for substitute teachers for those involved in her action research group. She also told them about the positive results they had found in the connections between writing and history. She explained how she and her team had collected data from students using research and writing checkpoints and that they had surveyed the students at the end of the process to gain insight into student perspectives. Intrigued, the English teachers asked for the results. Janet was pleased to share the survey results from the first study conducted with just an 11th grade US History class.

Results

Janet and her team found that based on a comparison of a pre-writing sample to a post-writing sample, students in the first study had shown a 7.89% increase overall in student achievement, as measured by the teacher-created rubric. She also shared what students felt about her approach to the research and writing process:

- 91% of students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that *“the research checkpoints helped to keep me organized and saved me from procrastinating.”*
- 91% of students also agreed or strongly agreed that their *“teacher was very helpful in teaching me all of the steps in the research process.”*
- 74% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they *“felt they learned more about their topic through their research and writing than they would have learned from their teacher during a class lesson.”* 17% had no opinion on this statement.
- 83% of students disagreed or strongly disagreed that *“being taught the research process was unnecessary.”*
- 87% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they *“took feedback into consideration when editing my paper.”*

For Janet, these results were as important as the increase in student achievement. The English teachers seemed impressed. Janet also told them that they were replicating the study for the third time.

“Each year we add more teachers,” she exclaimed. “Last year we had nine teachers in grades 9-11 and this year we have 13 teachers. The number of students has increased as well from 25 to about 600!”

The English teachers liked the idea of collaboration, and they told Janet they were impressed. They said they would think about possibly merging their departments for future action research.

Rethinking

Janet felt good about how the three-year action research study had impacted the students, enabling them to learn the life-long skill of research. She felt even more empowered knowing that her colleagues had seen how important action research can be for teachers as professionals, but would the English teachers join in?

Discussion Questions

1. How can teachers continue to create successful programs without financial incentives and financial support built into school budgets?
2. Are our public school teachers being recognized for their efforts that extend beyond the work day?
3. Is time being given to teachers to collaborate during the school day to help create the successful student?
4. How can we continue to keep highly qualified teachers like Janet in the profession?

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