



***“And be one traveler, long I stood”***  
**The Ethical Dilemmas of Teacher Research**  
**As a Research Agenda**

*This chapter reminds readers about the ethical dilemmas inherent in using teacher research in one’s research agendas, particularly at research universities.*

By Neal Shambaugh, West Virginia University  
504N Allen Hall, PO Box 6122 Morgantown, WV 26506-6122  
neal.shambaugh@mail.wvu.edu

Neal Shambaugh is an associate professor and program coordinator of Instructional Design and Technology in the Department of Technology, Learning, & Culture in the College of Human Resources and Education at West Virginia University. His research interests include instructional design, teacher education action research and technology use, novice problem-solving, and visual literacy.

### **Inspirational Reflection**

The “Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost (1920) is a commonly quoted poem regarding one’s choices in life, especially the lines *Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference*. The poem also urges one to commit to a path. If one reads the whole poem the words, *And be one traveler, long I stood*, depicts a new faculty member who must decide on a scholarly path, shaded on one side by the question of “What counts?” as research, and illuminated on the other side by one’s scholarly agenda. One possible avenue along this path is teacher research. For some faculty members, the study of teaching is a moral endeavor, as one’s teaching impacts others. Pragmatic issues of “what counts” as research influences the choices of what to study and what research road to take; thus, the line *And be one traveler, long I stood* seems to characterize this ethical dilemma.

The first time I stood at this crossroads was 1971 after completing student teaching in a fifth grade open classroom, an experience that exhausted me but was personally and professionally fulfilling by the end of the day. However, by the end of the semester, I opted out of teaching, choosing instead to start a program in engineering, but then dropping out, and owning two businesses. Subsequently, I worked for 15 years in a land-grant university as a video producer during which time I completed a business degree and entered graduate school. As a student again I found myself taking notes on how the instructors were teaching, as well as what content was being taught. Twenty-five years after student teaching I found myself traveling full circle back into teaching again but this time in a college classroom.

An exemplary college teacher provided me with opportunities to teach alongside her and jointly conduct teacher research, which was regularly disseminated at research conferences. As a faculty member myself I have come to realize how time-consuming and potentially risky her decision was. Each course delivery involved weekly meetings on what the teaching should involve, how the learning tasks should be structured, and

how students were coping with the tasks and learning the content, and what adjustments we needed to make. Several of my peers were surprised that my dissertation would not be about the textbook we co-authored. I chose, rather, to document the five-year study of teaching a course and how a reflexive teaching model developed (Shambaugh & Magliaro, 2001). The model depicted students and instructors as joint learners with similar characteristics but with different roles and how through different forms of participation structures we learned alongside students. Our reflexive stance, however, necessitated that we encounter ethical dilemmas.

### **Challenges Related to Ethical Decision Making**

*Challenge 1: Becoming explicit about one's foundations for teaching and learning.* One of the first teaching strategies that I learned from co-teaching was establishing in each course a *starting point*, the logic being that before progress can be achieved, one needs to know where one has been and where one now is at. Students identify 1-3 words that describe themselves as a teacher, their views of students, and their views of themselves as a learner. Educators may unconsciously operate from a deficit model, which in turn may be based on unclear learning outcomes, fuzzy assessment, and unorganized tasks and schedules. Related “starting point” activities have included an Educational Philosophy, a Designer’s Mission Statement, and personalized planning/designing models.

These “starting point” activities place one’s tacitly held teaching and learning beliefs “on the table” and how their teaching decisions are based on these beliefs, some of which are tacitly held and have gone unexamined. Students can then see how their teaching and learning beliefs match up with learning principles, which are based on learning theories. In this way, one’s theoretical foundation to teaching is developed *from* their beliefs rather than the other way around. Their theoretical foundation typically draws on several learning theories.

## Teacher Research as a Research Agenda

I also explain my theoretical foundation for teaching and learning, the rationale for tasks and how they are structured, and how learning will be assessed. By doing so, I share my teaching decisions, ask for their feedback, and prompt them to mentally “take notes” on my teaching. On the syllabus course outcomes are paired with student performance requirements; thus, the alignment of learning with assessment is clearly communicated. An assessment plan provides details. Providing my theoretical foundation and helping students to develop their own sets the stage for individual or joint teacher research.

*Challenge 2: Modeling good teaching and modeling inquiry into one’s teaching.* Modeling good teaching involves many personal traits, dispositions, and sensibilities, as well as skills. The definition of good teaching is sometimes confused with what makes an effective teacher. However, in my experience many teachers see these notions as the same. I view teaching as requiring personal dispositions and learned skills. Teacher research also involves a desire to improve as an educator and the skills needed to choose, frame, and conduct a study. Modeling of teaching and inquiry can continue at a higher level of student-instructor participation providing a more authentic experience on what it means to be a college teacher.

As with one’s theoretical foundation, teacher research can be shared in class. Teacher research can be conducted with other students, now that they have experienced the course as students. Joint research may be risky with graduate students, as it requires mutual investment of additional time and trust with the possibility of miscommunication, disappointment, and dead-ends along the way. As teaching involves daily risk-taking, so does collaborating with new colleagues. These risks must be taken and cannot be side-stepped.

One of the ethical dilemmas with studying teaching in higher education is sometimes experiencing resistance from one’s peers. I find it an irony in a college of education that faculty members are not conducting self-studies of their own teaching. For others, the notion of studying one’s teaching using research methodologies comes as a surprise to some faculty members. I

## Teacher Research as a Research Agenda

conduct short seminars with faculty members on ways to study one's teaching. I usually provide a broad overview of ways to do this, such as Bullough and Gitlin's (1995) coverage, ranging from teaching metaphors to curriculum analysis to action research. I then provide an overview of developmental research, which involves a three-stage cycle of documentation and analysis. In the first stage teaching decisions are recorded. A second stage records teaching implementation and adjustments, The third stage evaluates student learning and student perceptions of their learning and my teaching. Evaluation results then feed back into future course decisions (Richey, Klein & Nelson, 2003). Such an approach ensures that one documents the full range of developmental decisions, but also provides a rich descriptive history from which more specialized research can be conducted.

*Challenge 3: Being a responsive teacher and advisor.* From my earliest days of student teaching in a 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, I learned that paying attention to students required more time than I had thought, but that the efforts usually paid off. In one case, I worked one-on-one with a boy who did not engage with the other students. One day after school I had him remove everything from inside his extremely messy desk. I asked him to explain the value of each item before returning it to his desk. Most of the materials were thrown away. The stories he told me about the materials helped me to really get to know this boy. The messy desk represented where this student was and where I needed to be. What I learned then and what I continue to learn to this day is the value of learning as much about one's students as possible and what is in their world.

To understand the students' world, I remind them to remind me about what is going on in their lives and "what is on their plate." This information, which is gathered continuously, helps to adjust activity and task schedules. To accommodate shifts in a course, a certain amount of "slack" needs to be designed into the schedule, initially taking into account the semester calendar, major holidays, and student benchmark dates across other courses. Responsive teaching also requires careful listening and frequent checking for student understanding. Overall, the payoff is better

thinking and better work from students. Responsive teaching requires feedback that is timely and connected with due dates. Feedback must address student accomplishments and areas for improvement, and provide meaningful comments beyond writing “Good Work.” Feedback must be consistent. Suggestions that approve student work at one point should not contradict the student at a later point.

### **Ethical Teaching Strategies**

One can summarize additional teaching strategies as they apply to ethical teaching and teacher research by examining events across one’s teaching trajectory. In my initial reflection, I had to make a decision about what teaching was needed for a 5<sup>th</sup> grade boy who had some self-esteem issues. For this student to move forward, I had to help him find his own “starting point.” This was my first experience in realizing that “content” might involve more than content areas. Teaching, consequently, must address this “content.” And most importantly, to learn about this full range of content, one needed to learn about students. This particular case provided me with my own “starting point” I was to resume many years later.

When afforded the opportunity to teach alongside my doctoral advisor, I was pretty much terrified. Who was I to teach other teachers? She provided me with a timely book, *The Having of Wonderful Ideas* by Eleanor Duckworth (1987), who wrote about a view of teaching that gave me the courage to step back into the classroom: “By teacher, I mean someone who engages learners, who seeks to involve each person wholly . . . . and having engaged the learners, a teacher finds his questions to be the same as those that a researcher might into the nature of human understanding and wants to ask: What do you think and why? While the student learns, the teacher learns too” (p. 134). As a former radio announcer with a keen sense of audience, I realized that “I can do this. I can help students engage in their own learning!” Little did I know that the teacher-research stance would develop into a reflexive approach to teaching where I made explicit decisions about learning alongside students.

## Teacher Research as a Research Agenda

In working with experienced teachers, a useful strategy is the critical incident technique in which one recounts an experience where one's sense of being a teacher is tested. This occurred for me during graduate student teaching where one of my student peers refused to be assessed by me. A typical strategy for us was to use personal conferences to discuss student progress and concerns. During this conference, this student refused to talk. Not a word was uttered over 30 minutes. We managed to keep the conversation focused on learning and I remembered saying, "If there is no dialogue we cannot help you." In this class we had shared our theoretical foundations, one of which was our view of teaching as "assisting performance," an idea from Tharp and Gallimore (1988). After two days of mental paralysis, I realized that 19 other students in the course needed my assistance.

As I moved from graduate student to faculty member, I took on master's and doctoral advisees, and looked forward to sharing with them the richness of my experience. I came to learn that not all advisees were like me, and that my experience could not be theirs. I discovered that there was no formula that could be applied to all advisees, and that the advising process was fraught with internal questions like when to intervene, how do they think and work, how much time should I invest in this person, and when to suggest that maybe another faculty member is needed? I find advising to be my toughest teaching challenge. With a heavy doctoral advising load, it feels like the same people are taking the same "course" for 3-5 years and nobody hands anything in. I want to pay attention, but I'm bedeviled with the "who motivates whom?" issue. At the graduate level, I realized that not everyone can do this work, and that one has to like the work and be willing to pay the price to complete a program. This issue remains for me an unresolved ethical dilemma.

I promote teacher research on three fronts. The first is reminding tenure-track faculty members that disseminating one's teaching, particularly in a college or school of education, can "count" towards tenure. My message is not promoting a particular research methodology, but that teacher research can be a productive activity, if a new faculty member writes out a research

## Teacher Research as a Research Agenda

agenda and a publication plan, and then gets organized and “works” their plan. The second front is working in a five-year teacher education program where action research is required for a master’s degree. Modeling my own teacher research makes it easy for me to ask new teachers to conduct their own. Advising them remains a challenge in terms of identifying a study, unpacking its assumptions, and carrying it out and writing about it (Shambaugh & Webb-Dempsey, in press). However, one of the many messages that surrounds new teachers is that teacher research is outside of teaching and just “one more thing to do.” Teaching and advising in this area requires that one truly believes in teacher research and has conducted it in order to understand the challenges of implementing systematic inquiry in a classroom. A third front for teacher research involves my university-wide efforts to improve teaching. This effort requires a slow “sell” over time to gain the trust of faculty members and department heads from other units. “An hour here, an hour there” over many years is necessary.

### **Synthesis of Ethical Lessons Learned**

The ethical lessons that I have learned from the blending of teaching and teacher research can be summarized in terms of trust and reflexivity, and that for both there exist risks and rewards.

Early in my graduate student years, I realized that somewhere along the line “we have to trust our colleagues and students,” but that there would be risks in doing so. Building trust we know takes time and sincerity, but the rewards of doing so provides opportunities to get better at teaching. Building trust with students means paying attention and mutual trust is earned with engagement, fairness, and performance. However, not all students will buy into this set of accommodations. The “starting point” activities mentioned earlier are attempts at helping students to define themselves, what Grudin (1990) describes as a “formidable challenge” and potentially risky for an instructor to question educators’ view of their role.

Reflexivity, I learned from my first days as a student teacher in fifth grade, required a genuine disposition to learn



## Teacher Research as a Research Agenda

alongside a student. Desire, however, is not enough. To understand the term, one has to experience reflexivity and that these experiences will take many years. A reflexive teaching model required five years of teacher research, but the sustained focus provided me with productive work habits and a rich descriptive base to examine teaching decisions. Different forms of participation structures for students (Wenger, 1998) were examined, including texts, in-class activities, personal conferences, projects, webboards, web sites, and collaborative web pages. A view of teaching as assisting student performance widened the teaching options from just instructing to modeling, to cognitive structuring, and to reflecting (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

The value of locking risk-taking and reflexivity arm-in-arm is to remind me that I am on a road, be it risky and perilous, and both shaded and illuminated with uncertainty and possibility. In writing this essay I realized that I am experiencing the “content” of what it means to be a faculty member and thus living within my own research question where teaching and teacher research inform each other. I know that not all students will take advantage of trust in the right ways. Not all peers will value inquiry into teaching. Not all reflexivity of teaching and teacher research will yield “results” that are clear or predictable. This particular “road taken,” that of teaching and the study of one’s teaching remains a risky decision, but deciding to move forward in some direction and moving beyond where “long I stood” remains the hardest and most important decision.

### Journal Prompts

- *Who am I as a teacher?* Record 1-3 words that describe yourself as a teacher, your views of students, and your views of yourself as a learner. List and write about the critical incidents that have shaped your development as a teacher.
- *How do I want to be successful?* Write out your research agenda, research sites, and publication schedule.
- *How do I want to study my teaching?* Make a list of courses and other opportunities to study your teaching, either by yourself or with others. Compare this list for your research agenda and see how they might join.
- *How do I work?* Make a list of organization strategies you will use to work your research/teaching agenda.

### Supplementary Resources

#### **Teaching:**

Shulman, L. S. (2004). *The wisdom of practice: Essays on teaching, learning, and learning to teach*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Shulman, L. S. (2004). *Teaching as community property: Essays on higher education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.  
*These companion sets of essays provide me with encouraging grounding in the scope and significance of teaching. Shulman was a gift from my doctoral advisor.*

#### **Mentoring**

Sineta, M. (1998). *The mentor's spirit: Life lessons on leadership and the art of encouragement*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.  
*A book to be read between semesters or when the "going gets tough" during semesters.*

#### **Teacher Research**

Bullough, Jr., R. V., & Gitlin, A. (1995). *Becoming a student of teaching: Methodologies for exploring self and school context*. New York: Garland.  
*A useful text for teachers who want to study their teaching individually or collectively.*

**References**

- Duckworth, E. (1987). *The having of wonderful ideas and other essays on teaching and learning*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Frost, R. (1920). The Road Not Taken, from *Mountain Interval*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Grudin, R. (1990). *The grace of great things: creativity and imagination*. New York: Ticknor and Fields.
- Richey, R. C., Klein, J. D., & Nelson, W. A. (2003). Developmental research. In D. H. Jonassen (Ed.). *Handbook of research for educational communications and technology* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) pp. 1099-1130. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Shambaugh & Magliaro, S. (2001). A reflexive model for teaching and learning instructional Design. *Educational Technology Research & Development*, 49(2), 69-92.
- Shambaugh, R. N., & Webb-Dempsey, J. (in press). Chapter 3: Focusing the study: Framing a researchable question. In C. A. Lasonde & S. E. Israel (Eds.). *Handbook of Teacher Research*. International Reading Association.
- Tharp, R. G., & Gallimore, R. (1988). *Rousing minds to life: Teaching, learning, and school in social context*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.