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Try to Love the Questions Themselves

▶▶▶FINDING AND FRAMING A RESEARCH QUESTION

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves.

Rainer Maria Rilke, 1934

THE DUNNE-ZA, a branch of the Athabaskan tribe, say that a person who speaks from the authority of his or her own experience "little bit know something." Knowledge, the elders say, empowers a person to live in this world with intelligence and understanding (Ridington 1990). Dunne-Za men and women expect their children to gain power by observing the animals and natural forces around them through a series of quests called "vision quests." Every person "knows something" from these experiences and from the stories that emerge from the quests.

The goals of teacher-researchers, like those of the Dunne-Za on vision quests, is to "little bit know something" about their students' abilities and learning strategies. New knowledge not only better enables teachers to understand students and their world but also empowers the learners themselves.

Teacher-researchers at all grade levels—from kindergarten to graduate level—are increasingly turning to qualitative or ethnographic research methods. Observational studies help the teacher understand the student's world from the *student's point of view* rather than from that of the teacher's own culture. Students are the informants in teacher research, helping us to learn both the recipes for behavior in their cultures and the learning strategies that they employ. And central to the role of informants is being an active collaborator in these research endeavors.

Teachers just beginning their own classroom research often feel overwhelmed; there is so much to study in their classrooms that they wonder how other teachers have known how to start. As Glenda Bissex writes, "A teacher-

researcher may start out not with a hypothesis to test, but with a wondering to pursue" (1987, p. 3). All teachers have wonderings worth pursuing. Transforming wonderings into questions is the start of teacher research.

FINDING THE QUESTION

In qualitative research, the questions come from real-world observations and dilemmas. Here are some examples of the wonderings that teacher-researchers we know are pursuing:

- What procedures or activities promote or encourage students to revise their writing?
- How does a writing-workshop approach affect the growth of students' skills in the mechanics of writing?
- How does a whole language/process approach affect a learning-disabled child?
- What problems does a pre-service teacher solve as she begins to teach without her mentor teacher?
- What happens when eighth graders choose their own reading material in a reading-workshop situation?
- What language occurs in mathematics learning and what role does it play?
- What can my eighth graders and I learn about our writing when they respond to a paper I've written?
- How do children resolve problems on their own in their improvisational dramatic play?
- How do teachers of writing change their instruction after participating in a writing institute?
- What is the difference between the genres of writing students use on a class message board and those they attempt in writing folders?
- How do students evaluate the reading and writing of peers?
- What strategies do students use to help peers during whole-class writing discussions?

The questions these teachers chose to pursue arose out of their classroom queries; they were important questions for their teaching.

Kimberly Campbell, a high-school teacher, struggled with the role of conferences in her classroom. In her teaching journal, Kim wrote:

> I find that as I move around the room to ask, "How's it going?" I get very few responses. Often, I end up feeling like an intruder, an interruption in their process. . . . I also find myself struggling with the how's and when's of conferencing. For example, today I had five students ready for editing conferences, but only had time for two. I was interrupted three times during one conference by other students. And I had no time to do brief content conferences. I'm feeling confused and overwhelmed.

As the term progressed, Kim was able to focus her concerns into questions for research: *What is the role of conferencing in a high-school writing workshop? How do peer conferences differ from teacher conferences?"*

First-grade teacher Christina Randall also used her writing to focus on concerns about her interactions with students. But her observations led to much different questions:

> Going to lunch is one of the many hassles faced with youngsters in a portable classroom. We need at least fifteen minutes to wash hands, put on outer gear, and clean our room. Usually we are keeping some other class waiting. Last week the procedure was much the same. On our way into the main building they spy it. The line stops. "What's that?" "Is that a starfish?" "What's that starfish doing on top of the clam?" "Lookit! I just saw that clam thing open its shell." Questions are being asked faster than can possibly be answered. We are all fascinated with the saltwater aquarium. I reluctantly pull myself back from the tank with a "Let's go, gang. We can come back later to look at the aquarium." The questions continued after lunch and throughout the rest of the day. Within days the aquarium begins to show up in writing.
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> In creating a language-rich environment for young children, I have capitalized on the interest in the saltwater aquarium. We wrote a group story, went to research materials, and returned to the main building with observation logs in hand. Teachable moment? As a teacher in search of stimulating topics, I could hardly pass it up.
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> Teachable moment. Developmentally appropriate practice. Process approach. Cooperative learning. Least restrictive environment. Whole language.
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> Buzz words suggest that the transition be made from focusing on how the child succeeds with the curriculum to how the curriculum succeeds with the child.
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> *But is success determined by the products of tests or the processes observed and documented? If the curriculum is rich and diverse in language-building activities, what about remedial services like speech and language therapy? Do children need to be pulled out for remedial services to work on specific skills?*

Like Christina, many teachers have to do some wandering to get to their wonderings. Often questions for research start with a feeling of tension. Christina wants to look beyond faddish buzz words and rapid implementation of new teaching methods to try to figure out what is really going on with language development in her students and what this means for the systems of intervention established in schools. Kim wants to understand why her expectations for conferences are so often at odds with the expectations of her students, and how this might affect her future conferences with students.

It is not surprising that the root word of question is *quest*. Teacher-researchers embark on a new kind of vision quest as they look for research topics in their classroom. They want questions to research that can lead to a new vision of themselves as teachers and their students as learners. These questions often involve seeing their students in new ways.

Jack Campbell, a teacher-researcher from Fairbanks, Alaska, realized he needed to take a closer look at his students and their culture if he wanted to help them become better writers.

> This past year, I've watched Native writers become confused because of the way their writing has been edited. When they receive feedback, either from their response groups . . . or from me, sometimes they lose confidence because they take the criticism 'personal.' When these criticisms occur in their experience-based writing . . . they seem to interpret their writing as being ineffective. When a novice writer offers an essay on his or her personal experiences, and these in turn are criticized, perhaps for legitimate technical reasons, their writing voices lose authority and direction. The critiques, without explanations, become forms of cultural tyrannies.

As Jack thought about changing his teaching to meet the needs of his students, he wanted to be able to document how these strategies affected his

students. He crafted his teaching dilemma into the following question: *How can Alaskan Native writers establish a stronger writing voice?*

Natalie Goldberg advises writers to be specific. "Not car, but Cadillac. Not fruit, but apple. Not bird, but wren. Not a codependent, neurotic man, but Harry, who runs to open the refrigerator for his wife, thinking she wants an apple, when she is headed for the gas stove to light her cigarette. . . . Get below the label and be specific to the person" (1990, p. 3). Goldberg stresses that the best way to create a vivid and true picture with words is through specific, tangible, concrete images. The same can be said of a good teacher-research question. All these teachers started with specific instances of tension in their classrooms—a lack of rapport in conferences, an inability to get students to line up, hurt feelings when revision suggestions were made. As these teacher-researchers thought about these tensions, they began to focus on larger issues of culture, learning, and school structure. The questions they asked were not aimed at quick-fix solutions to errors in classroom technique. While asking these questions might help these teachers with their methods, the explorations have even greater implications. All involve understanding students and teaching in much deeper ways.

This attempt at new understanding often leads beyond the classroom door. Joan Merriam, a fourth-grade resource-room teacher, was happy with the successes of her students. But her case study of Charles started when she realized that everyone involved in Charles's schooling did not share her definition of success:

> On Parent Conference night, Charles's entire family arrived in my room at the appointed time. Charles chose some poetry books and took his younger sister to the couch and read to her while I talked with his parents.
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> They had just come from a conference with Charles's classroom teacher, and concern was on their faces. Fourth grade is the first level in our school that assigns letter grades, so letters on the rank card were a new experience for them. Charles had received C's in science, social studies, and spelling. Although his teacher had tried to assure them that C was average, they were not convinced. My glowing report of Charles's progress in reading and his grade of A did little to allay their fears. They were all too aware that *The Boxcar Children* in which Charles was reading so well was written at a third-grade reading level. While Charles's mom assured me that he was achieving success in my room, she was worried about what to her was a lack of success in the classroom. She asked me to predict when Charles would "catch up" to his peers and work at grade level. When he goes on to fifth grade, Charles will rotate among four teachers for classes. Both parents expressed concern that Charles might have difficulty "keeping up" with the rest of the class next year. While I did my best to reassure them that Charles was progressing, it was evident that they left the conference with some lingering doubts. That conference left me with some doubts as well. Charles's parents and I had been operating at different levels. I was excited at how far Charles had come, while they were very worried about how far he had to go. When writing Charles's progress report I had only considered his success during the one hour a day he worked in my room. I needed to look beyond my room for ways to help him succeed in his classroom and at home.

As a result of that conference, Joan established two research questions worth exploring: *How could she help Charles attain a higher level of "success" in his other classroom? How could she better communicate with his parents about his progress?*

Joan was willing to look beyond the one hour Charles spent daily in her classroom to understand his needs. Jack's research question would take him into Native American culture so that he could better understand what criticism meant to his students. The answers to these teachers' research questions won't necessarily validate their teaching practices. More likely, these teachers will discover that they need to change how they work with students and how they view young learners.

Nancie Atwell, a well-known teacher-researcher from Edgecomb, Maine, remembers her first years as a teacher-researcher. Over time, she found her research questions changing as her view of her own teaching changed:

> For six years I studied the writing of eighth graders. Over these six years, the nature of the questions I asked in my classroom changed, as my understandings of research have changed. In the beginning I wanted to know, What should I do in my classroom? What will happen when I do it? I wanted to measure the effects of my teaching and prove my methods. My research was inevitably some variation of the same question: When I perform—say, write in my journal when I tell students to write in theirs—what wonderful things will my students do? . . . The focus was on my methods. The focus was on me. It was a truncated version of classroom research.
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> Then, as I started looking—really looking, through the prism of the stunning naturalistic studies of children's writing of the last decade—my teaching methods took a back seat. My students climbed up front and became my focus. I conducted research to learn from them about their uses and views of written language. (Atwell 1991, pp. 315–316)

Nancie's evolution as a researcher involved a willingness to change. Kim, Christina, Jack, and Joan are also unthreatened by change. They all could have easily developed questions through their observations from a defensive stance, a determination to maintain the classroom status quo. Kim could have asked, "How can I make my students understand the importance of my conferences with them?" Christina could have asked, "How can I get students to spend more time on task?" Instead, the research questions, if answered, will probably result in changes in the teachers—not merely in their methods, but in their teaching philosophies and attitudes toward students.

FRAMING THE QUESTION

"One purpose of qualitative methods is to discover important questions, processes, and relationships, not to test them" (Marshall and Rossman 1989, p. 43). To keep the research process open to continual discovery, the framing of research questions is critical.

The first consideration while framing questions is to make sure the question is open-ended enough to allow possibilities the researcher hasn't imagined to emerge. This rules out the kind of closed yes or no questions that are developed in experimental studies to test the differences between control and experimental groups.

Look again at some of the sample questions listed in the previous section on "Finding the Question." What do you notice about them? The patterns that you see in your colleagues' research questions can help you frame your own. You will notice that these questions are posed in a way that will be answered

by descriptions and observations. The key words are most often *how* or *what*, leaving the teacher-researcher open to describing the process and changes as they emerge. Framing the questions in this way helps make the research feasible for us as teachers in the midst of our teaching; we are not tied to a rigid procedure that may interfere with the flow of the classroom and with the changing needs of students.

When posing your research question for the first time, come back to what intrigues you in your classroom, what you wonder about. You might begin by thinking about a particular student that you are not quite sure how to help. What is working for her in the classroom and what is causing her problems? Perhaps poetry seems to be the one avenue that is meaningful to her. What is it about poetry that facilitates writing for her and other students? You might frame a question that allows you to follow and describe the writing behaviors of this student and others in the classroom in relation to the poetry that they read, write, and hear.

You might instead want to investigate classwide teaching dilemmas that have arisen, as Kim did in her question about the conferences in her high-school writing class or as Jack did in his question about ways to help his Native Alaskan writers retain their voices in their writing. What are you puzzled by in your classroom? Teachers often need to rely on their intuitive hunches. Trust these hunches to guide you in the genesis of your research question. Remember that research is a process "that religiously uses logical analysis as a critical tool in the *refinement* of ideas, but which often begins at a very different place, where imagery, metaphor, and analogy, 'intuitive hunches,' kinesthetic feeling states, and even dreams and dream-like states are prepotent" (Bargar and Duncan 1982, p. 3).

When you create your questions, build in enough time for observations to take shape and even for the nature of the questions to shift in focus. The questions we pursue evolve and become richer when we allow our ideas and observations to incubate. Harry Matrone found his questions and research going through the same early evolution that Nancie Atwell describes. He reflects on his own research experiences and urges new researchers to give themselves the gift of time:

> As a result of my experience I'm wondering, shouldn't the first year of a teacher-researcher study be just doing observations—with the eye of the researcher—on things going on in one's classroom? Then, after making these observations, a teacher-researcher could identify an area to study during year two. I think my original question is being considered too soon. What I should really be looking at this year are the changes in topics that kids in my workshops experience over the course of a semester or two. Kids invest themselves in learning to the degree that their emotions allow them to. I realized a month or so into the school year that I had put my eye on the cognitive sight before I had considered the emotional.
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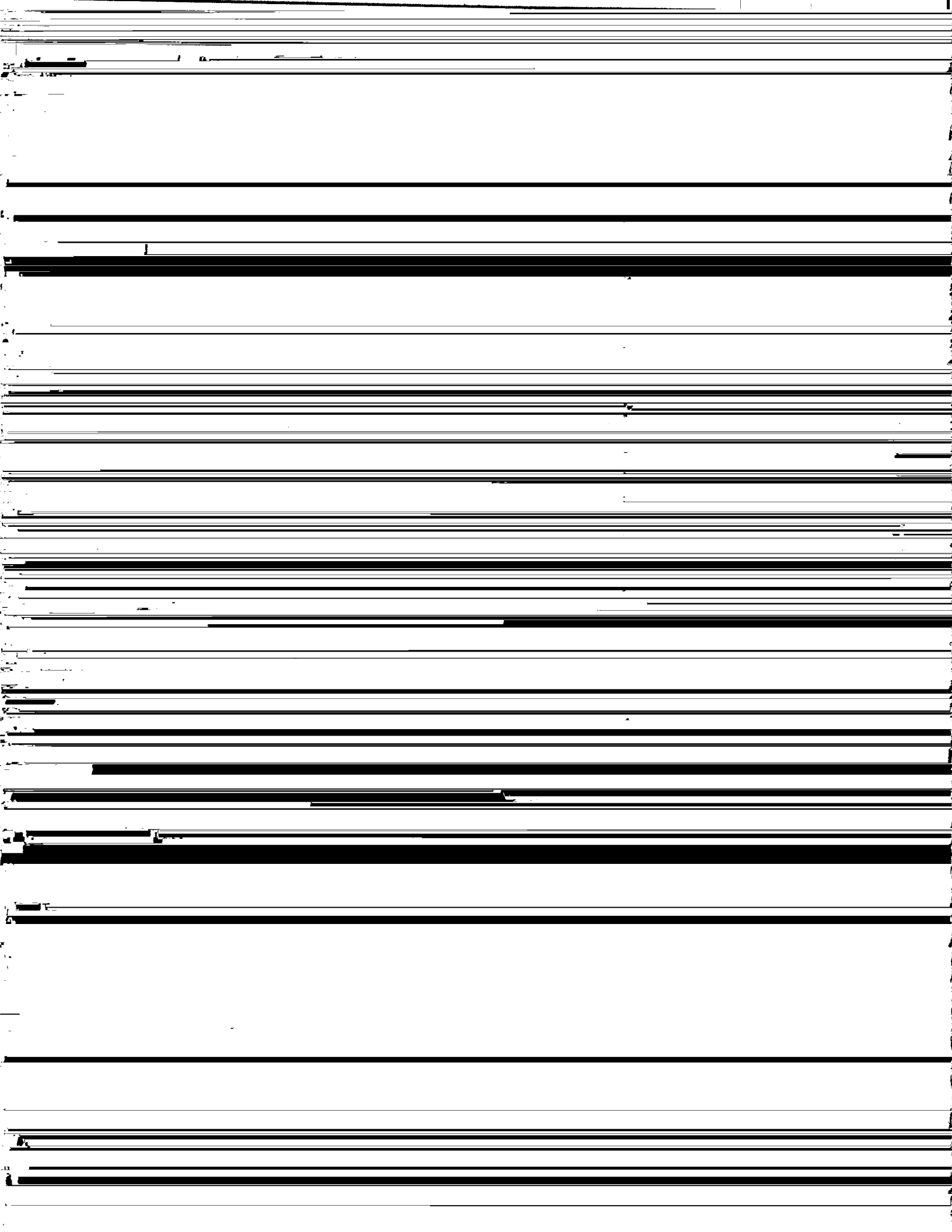
> As far as discoveries related to my original question, while I may have set out in the beginning to check out the strategies kids develop when their instruction is less structured and directed, what I've really done is check out how well they can apply the procedures that I teach. The reality is that the choices my students have are much more limited than my original question implies. At this point, I'm less taken with the idea of trying to write on my original question than I am to write on some other area I've become more aware of. I feel good about the effort. I'm learning a great deal.



in several different ways until you have all the information you want included in it. Now, read it again. Does it still intrigue you? Are you still itching to investigate this area? If the answer is no, look over your process