

**Action Research in School  
EDUC 718  
Instructor: Allan Feldman  
Student: Matt Wohl**

**ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT**

The Context

It is difficult to know whether you are, actually, a good teacher or not. But if I were to ask that question unscientifically—and look for an answer in the reputation I have among my past and present students, their parents, my colleagues, and my supervisors—then I believe that I am, on balance, a good teacher. And what this means is that my teaching practice results in meaningful and substantive learning on the part of my students. What and how I should be teaching my students, and how one can measure the degree to which they are learning what I am teaching them, are questions I shall not address here. The point is that I am regarded as a good teacher, and I believe that this reputation is not groundless. And yet I have not, in my estimation, earned that reputation with a particular group of students I have taught this year. I have approached them in much the same way I have approached all my classes for much of the past ten years, and I believed it was reasonable to expect that the results I had gotten in the past would be replicated with this particular group. But that did not happen, and I decided to conduct an action research project with this class to 1) better understand why my teaching and the students' learning has not met my expectations, and 2) know what adjustments I could make to my practice so that the quality of my students' learning could improve.

I teach history in a small rural high school district in western Massachusetts which serves approximately 300 students. The research project took place in a 9<sup>th</sup> grade “applied” level World History class. There are currently 13 students in the class. The

four main academic subjects are all homogeneously grouped into three levels: honors, college prep, and applied. Most of the students in the applied classes have individualized educational plans (IEPs) and have diagnosed learning disabilities that compromise their ability to decode text and to think abstractly from text. There are also several students in each of the classes that are not on IEPs but who have not been academically successful due to observed and documented learning difficulties, and several of them are on 504 plans. A small number of these applied students who are not on IEPs or 504s have histories of passive or oppositional behavior and have been placed in these classes because of the increased structure and accountability they provide. The texts, supplementary materials, student activities, and teaching methods in these classes are all designed to provide the greatest possibility of success for students who have experienced academic difficulties due to the factors mentioned above.

The students in the class in which the research project took place are typical of other applied classes I have taught: seven are on IEPs, two are on 504s, three have been labeled by the guidance department as chronic underachievers, and one has a history of oppositional and disruptive behavior as well as academic failure. What is atypical about these students is that very few of them were meeting my expectation regarding their academic performance and their personal behavior: few of them completed their homework on a regular basis or participated willingly in class discussion and activities; and, with the exception of three of them, their behavior was consistently disruptive when it was not being closely monitored. I had not had a group like this since my first year teaching, and, in that case, my lack of experience seems to have been a major contributing factor. But by this fall I had years of success under my belt, and as the first

weeks of the school year went by I was both surprised and taken aback by the lack of achievement and civility I saw displayed by nearly all of the students in this particular class. It soon became clear that I would have to make some sort of an adjustment if I expected to see different results and improved conduct.

## The Problem

### *My focus*

After considering a wide variety of factors that impact the teaching and learning that take place in this particular class, from the students' socioeconomic status to the Massachusetts History and Social Science Frameworks, it became clear to me that the vast majority of those factors are beyond my ability to control. Therefore, I decided to focus on a factor that I could control: the manner in which I manage the class, and specifically the manner in which I (1) interact with the students, (2) communicate my expectations regarding the academic performance and their personal behavior, (3) respond to actions or attitudes that do not meet my expectations, and (4) impose consequences when a student's performance or behavior is not acceptable. Earlier in the year I had attempted a number of adjustments to the curriculum, my instructional methods, student activities, as well as my affect with them. All these adjustments had been made with the assumption that if the curriculum were more relevant, the methods less didactic, the activities less structured, and the affect more personal that the students' performance and behavior would improve. Much to my surprise they did not result in any marked improvement in the students' performance or behavior—if anything, they worsened. But the adjustments were not made, nor their results analyzed, in a

particularly rigorous fashion. So, this spring I decided to return to the curriculum, methods, and activities that were in place in the early fall—and have been effective with dozens of other groups of similar students over the past several years—and to take a different approach to the manner in which I relate to them and manage their behavior. The purpose of this action research project was to determine, in a formal and rigorous manner, if such an adjustment would lead to the improvements that the previous adjustments had failed to achieve.

*My practice.*

The relationships that I have been able to establish with the many hundreds of students I have had over the years cannot be reduced to one type, but they all share two components: high expectations and personal attention. My assumption is that the challenges I lay out for my students would be met successfully, and that my support and belief in them is helpful in that process. This is an oversimplification of the manner in which my students and I interact, but, generally speaking, it is accurate. The work I have done with the group of students who make up the class I am studying for this project followed similar lines. But it became very clear relatively early in the year that these students were not willing to meet my expectations and were not responsive to my personal attention. After making the adjustments described above, I decided to use this action research project as a means of assessing the effectiveness of approaching the students from a more formal position, which placed almost all of the emphasis on the expectations I have regarding their performance and behavior in my class, and much less emphasis on the personal relationships between myself and the students. I made this adjustment thoughtfully, intentionally, and gradually—and collected and analyzed data to

see if my hypothesis was correct: that the personal attention which I have been giving these students is, for some reason, problematic for them, and that they will be more willing and able to perform and behave in ways that meet my expectations if I assume a more professional and formal affect with them.

*The research literature.*

Despite the challenges of teaching these applied classes I have not made any marked changes to my teaching practice when working with these students: once I developed a curriculum that contained texts and activities that were accessible and manageable for the students, I went about teaching them in much the same way I teach my honors and advanced placement classes. This approach is in line with my philosophical beliefs regarding best practice, and is grounded in the research literature (Brandt, 1992). My teaching is guided by the same general principles and practices that educational researchers have identified as those that consistently result in meaningful and purposeful student learning (Brophy, 1994; Shulman, 2004). I have also consistently implemented the type of classroom management strategies seem to consistently get the best results in maintaining a positive and directed learning environment (Emmer and Evertson, 1981; Doyle, 1985; LePage, Darling-Hammond, and Akar, 2005). And when confronted by a particularly defiant or unmotivated student I was able to develop a set of approaches that were grounded in research (Brophy, 1996, 1998) and that I found to be successful in redirecting the problematic behavior. But I am also aware of how ambivalent and unclear students often are about the impact which their schooling has on their learning (Jackson, 1990), as well as how difficult it is to quantify the impact which teaching actually has on learning and the experience of being a student (Jackson, 1992).

Little of this, however, seemed to help me with the particular group of 9<sup>th</sup> graders, and I realized that I would have to go beyond what I had learned from my studies of the research on effective teaching and classroom management—as well as my own experience, habits, and assumptions—if I was going to be able to improve my teaching practice and the quality of my students’ learning. It was with this goal in mind that I undertook this action research project.

## Methodology

### *Rationale*

My primary objective was to develop a set of data collection methods that would enable me to evaluate my hypothesis: that my students’ academic performance and personal behavior would improve if I took a more professional and formal approach with them. Three data sources were used to make this evaluation, all of which are described in detail below: student data, teacher data, and observer data. By using three data sources I was able to use triangulation in my analysis of the data, thereby increasing the objectivity and trustworthiness of my findings. Student and teacher data were collected over an eight-week period from late February through late April, and observer data were collected during an interview in early May.

### *Data collection methods*

*Student data.* The data take several forms that were designed to measure changes in the students’ academic performance and personal behavior in the class they have with me. The data on academic performance are: (1) homework completion rates, (2) participation rates in class activities, (3) performance on review games done prior to

biweekly tests, and (4) performance on biweekly tests. The data on personal behavior are: (1) number of tardies, (2) number of unexcused absences, (3) number of redirections of student behavior, and (4) number of disciplinary referrals.

*Teacher data.* The teacher data took the form of entries in my action research notebook. I made regular notes on my perceptions of the manner in which I established and then maintained the professionalism of my affect, while remaining available to the students in the manner in which I interact with them individually. It seemed important that my affect, despite its new formality, not be entirely impersonal. Entries in the research notebook also included observations on the affect and attitude of the class as a whole, and how the students' academic performance and personal behavior reflected their affect and attitude. Also included were reflection on the performance and behavior of individual students, as well as particular interactions or redirections that took place involving a particular student.

*Observer data.* I had the benefit of having an observer in this class: Ellie, who is a special education paraprofessional who helps me with the two applied level classes I teach. She has been with me for the past two years and, as result, has observed my teaching and my students' learning over a long period of time. I conducted an interview (see appendix for interview protocol) with Ellie in which I asked her to share her observations regarding my previous approach with this particular group, and then her impressions of the changes in my practice and the impact that those changes had on the students' academic performance and personal behavior.

## Results

### *Analysis of student data*

Data was collected on student academic performance and personal behavior over the eight-week period of the research project and were then compared to similar data collected during a randomly selected eight-week period during the second quarter of the school year. During each eight-week period homework was assigned on average three times per week, class discussions and activities took place during two to three of the four weekly class periods, and there were four review games and tests. The data on the students' academic performance indicate a marked improvement in both homework completion (93%) and class participation rates (98%) after the implementation in the change described above when compared to data from the fall (72% and 90% respectively). But results on review games and tests have either remained constant (students are able to answer correctly approximately the same number of questions during the biweekly review game results) or worsened (the average test grade dropped from a 76 to 68). One factor that had a significant impact on the test results was that on three of the four tests administered during the research project two or three students failed to complete the essay component of the test. The essays are worth 40% of the test grade, so failure to complete them had a major effect on the test results, both individually and collectively.

The data on the students' personal behavior indicate a significant decline of tardies (5, down from 11), no cuts (but there have been none all year), a significant decline in redirections (an average of 2.6 per class period, down from approximately 5

per class [based on my recollection and a conversation with my aide]), and a drop in disciplinary referrals (2, down from 5).

### *Analysis of teacher data*

As described above, the entries in my action research notebook focused on three factors: (1) the consistency of my affect, (2) the affect and attitude of the class as a whole, and (3) the performance and behavior of individual students. The notebook entries indicate that I was able to transition smoothly to a more professional and formal affect with the class as a whole, and that I was able to maintain that affect on a consistent basis once the transition had been made. This is an important factor, for if I had not been able to maintain a consistent affect it would have not only compromised the results of the research project, but also been confusing and potentially harmful to the climate and culture of the class, as well as the relationships I had been able to build with a number of the students. The data in the entries also indicate that I was able to maintain this professional and formal affect when I was interacting with individual students, whether before class as they were coming into the room, during the lesson, as well as at the very end of class. My goal was to be approachable rather than impersonal, but to maintain a degree of professional and respectful detachment in the manner in which I approached and interacted with the students, collectively and individually.

The data on the affect and attitude of the class as a whole indicated that they responded positively to my affect: their behavior seemed to improve, disruptive and problematic behavior decreased, willingness to engage in the activities and assignments increased, and, in general, the culture and climate of the class was more conducive to teaching and learning. The entries from the first two weeks show a degree a slight lag

between the transition I made and a change in the students' performance and behavior. But the entries from the following six weeks contain numerous observations and comments that indicate that once the students sensed the consistency of my affect they adjusted their affect and attitude toward the class—and their performance and behavior showed consistent improvement.

The notebook entries that focused on individual students generally fell into three categories: (1) students who did not seem to respond to my new affect, (2) students that responded positively to my new affect, and (3) students that responded negatively. This data set is not representative of the class as a whole, but reflects observations, impressions, and reflections on the experience the individual students and how they were affected by the change in my teaching practice. There were two students (one who has consistently performed and behaved very well, another whose performance and behavior are far more inconsistent and generally poor) who did not seem to respond one way or another to my new approach. Ten of their classmates seems to have responded positively to the change: the quantity and quality of their work improved, their behavior was more appropriate, and their attitude was more positive—in general, they seemed more willing to engage in the learning experience which the class was designed to offer them. Only one student seemed to respond in a consistently negative way, but that behavior was not particularly problematic for me or for the rest of the class due to its passive nature. But it became clear that this one student felt that the change I had made in my affect made me a less likable teacher and the class a markedly less enjoyable one. The student's disapproval manifested itself in an initial unwillingness to participate in class discussion and activities, although he did participate on a consistent basis when encouraged to do so

by his classmates (he only refused three times, and I did not make an issue of it but noted it in my log book).

#### *Analysis of observer data*

The data collected during the interview with Ellie was generally congruent with the student and teacher data described above. Ellie's initial responses emphasized the difficult nature of the particular group of students, although she acknowledged that there were a number of students whose performance and behavior were generally good. But Ellie was particularly concerned with the students' insistence on the relevance of the curriculum: if they did not consider it to be relevant to their lives they saw absolutely no point in learning. She observed that this is not uncommon, but that this particular group of students' conception of what is and is not relevant seems to be especially narrow, and preclude the likelihood of willing engagement and participation in nearly all of the learning experiences offered in a traditional school setting. She also confirmed the relative lack of success of some of the adjustments I had made earlier in the year, although she complimented me for having been willing to try new strategies and approaches. She did comment on the impact which one adjustment may have had on the students' recent performance and behavior: for several weeks we took a break from the traditional curriculum and investigated topics and issues that were of interest and concern to them (and fell loosely within what could be considered the social studies). Ellie was convinced that this break, although ultimately unsuccessful in creating sustained student motivation and appropriate behavior, made them more willing to perform at a higher level and behave more appropriately once we returned to the traditional curriculum.

In general Ellie saw a marked improvement in the students' academic performance and personal behavior following the change in my affect and approach: she saw more students willingly doing their homework for my class in the resource room (where she works for several periods a day), they seemed to be better prepared for class, they participated more willingly in class discussions and activities, and their behavior had improved "in a very visible and impressive way." She mentioned three students in particular who had surprised her with their new commitment to their studies, at least in my class—and attributed the change in their performance and behavior to the change in the class. When asked about the consistency with which I maintained my new affect she responded that she was "surprised and impressed by how well you are able to be consistent and maintain a level head with the kids." When asked why she felt that this new approach was getting improved results from the students she commented that "your low-key approach definitely helps keep them focused, and helps the more excitable and distractible kids stay on task and on top of their behavior." In addition, it seemed to her that these students have a difficult time regulating their own behavior, and when they are placed and contained in a structured environment in which they are held accountable in a very consistent and matter-of-fact manner they tend to be less disruptive and spend far more time on-task. Her concluding comment also addressed the question of why she thought this new approach seemed to be effective with this particular group of students: "I bet they don't know how to relate to adults in a personal way—emotional interactions with authority figures probably confuse them since they have such poor bonding skills due to the inconsistent behavior of many of their parents and the other adults in their lives."

## Discussion

### *Limitations*

It is very difficult to establish a causal link between the adjustment in my teaching practice and the improvements in the students' academic performance and personal behavior that were clearly evident in all three data sources. The variety and complexity of the factors that impact the experiences of adolescent students make claims regarding such a link highly suspect, particularly the students who participated in this action research project, all of whom face many challenges and struggles in and out of school. To isolate the action I took—the change in my teaching practice—as the cause of the change in them is not possible. But it is clear that, despite the slight dip in the test scores, a significant change did take place in nearly all of the students' performance and behavior. And, despite the difficulty in establishing a causal link between the two, it is unlikely that the link is purely coincidental.

### *Implications*

*For my teaching practice.* The primary implication that this action research project had for my teaching relates to the usefulness of action research as a means of reflecting on, assessing, and the transforming my teaching practice in a rigorous and intentional manner. Too often I either fall back onto past practice and old habits which, despite the success they have brought me and my students, may not be the most effective means to the ends: to provide all of my students with a valuable and purposeful learning experience. Action research offers teachers such as myself an enormously useful and promising method for improving their teaching practice. In this particular case it made it possible for me to reflect on and assess a number of beliefs and practices which are

fundamental to my teaching—and to recognize that subtle but thoughtful, consistent, and intentional modifications to those beliefs and practices can have a dramatic impact on the quality of my students learning. And finally, action research offers me a way of assessing whether or not those modifications have, in fact, helped improve the quality of my students' learning.

*For my students' learning.* There are a number of implications regarding my views of my students' learning: (1) that some of my basic assumptions regarding the role of the teacher-student relationship as a means of motivating students to perform and behave well may be flawed, incomplete, or misguided, particularly when working with at-risk students; (2) that at-risk students may not know how to regulate their behavior when the primary characteristic of the relationship which their teacher is attempting to establish with them is a personal one rather than a professional one, regardless of whether the teacher has established very high expectations regarding student performance and behavior; and (3) that the best way to help at-risk students meet those expectations may be to approach them in a manner that is formal and firm, but also matter-of-fact and low-key, thereby allowing the affect to remain professional rather than personal.

*For future research.* I remain keenly interested in one question in particular: why has an approach that has been so successful in the past not been nearly as successful with this particular group? This research project was not designed to answer this question, but it remains an important one for my teaching practice. This question leads to a number of other important ones: why does this particular group seem to respond better to a formal and professional affect on the part of the teacher (when, in the past, such at-risk groups have responded in the opposite manner), what is problematic for them about the more

informal and personal affect, and what, in general, do they want and need from their teachers and the manner in which they are taught so that they can be successful learners? I would like to continue to reflect on my practice, and spend some of the remainder of the school year exploring all of these questions with the students who participated in this research project.

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## Appendix

*Questions from my interview with Ellie, my aide, to be conducted at the end of the project:*

1. How would you describe the academic performance and personal behavior of the students in this class prior to the past ten weeks?
2. How would you characterize the change in the manner in which I have related to the students over the past two months?
3. How would you characterize the manner in which I related to them prior to this change?
4. How would you characterize the students' response to this change?
5. Please select one student in particular and please characterize their response to this change.
6. Why do you think the class as a whole has responded as it has, if you think that such a generalization can be made?
7. Why do you think the individual student responded the way they did?
8. Do you think that a more personal and informal approach is problematic for this particular group of students? Why?
9. Do you think that a more professional and formal approach is effective with this particular group of students? Why?
10. Have you seen an improvement in the students' academic performance and personal behavior during this action research project?

## Informed Consent Form

Ellie Whitehouse  
Mount Everett School  
Sheffield, MA 01257

Dear Ellie:

I am currently enrolled and in a graduate class at the University of Massachusetts on action research in schools, and will be conducting a study on my teaching practice with a group of 9<sup>th</sup> grade at-risk students. Your participation, should you consent, will consist of one 45 minute interview. The interview will be taped and sections of it will be transcribed. The information gained in the interview will contribute significantly to my action research project. Pseudonyms will be used and you anonymity will be protected.

Your participation is voluntary, and if, at any time, you wish to withdraw from the study you may do so without prejudice or penalty. You have the right to review any of the material to be used in the study, and, upon the study's completion, I will furnish you a summary of the findings if you wish.

You have been given two copies of this letter, both of which should be signed if you are willing to participate in this study. One copy should be retained for your records and the other should be returned to me. Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, and that you may withdraw your consent at any time. If you have any questions I can be reached at extension 134, at home at (413) 274-0292, or via email at [mwohl@tek2000.net](mailto:mwohl@tek2000.net).

You may reach my professor, Dr. Allan Feldman, as well at [afeldman@educ.umass.edu](mailto:afeldman@educ.umass.edu):

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Mount Everett Regional School  
Sheffield, MA 01257**

Glenn Devoti, Principal  
Mount Everett Regional School  
Sheffield, MA 12057

Dear Glenn:

This letter is to request your permission for me to conduct an action research study of the teaching and learning that is taking place in my Applied World Beginnings class. The study will be conducted by me, and has two purposes: first, to understand how a variety of factors impact the teaching and learning that takes place in that class; and second, to improve my teaching practice.

In signing this statement you are agreeing to allow me to use three long block classes to have discussions with the students/participants regarding the teaching and learning that is taking place in that class, as well as several factors that, in my opinion, impact the teaching and learning that is taking place there. Those discussions will take place over a three week period and will be taped. The students' comments and responses will be an important component of the action research project he is conducting. This study may be used, at a later date, in papers and articles prepared for publication in professional and research journals and books. The participants will not be identified by name, and all reference to particular schools, school districts, and localities will be eliminated or modified to preserve anonymity.

The students' participation in the project is voluntary. Their parent/guardian will be asked to sign a consent form, and after signing the consent form they still have the right to withdraw their permission at any time. Please note that the purpose of this study is for me to learn more about my teaching and the students' learning and not to evaluate them as students. Participation or non-participation in this study will have no effect on their grades or progress in the class. And I assure you that after signing this consent form you still have the right to withdraw your permission at you discretion.

If you agree to the above please sign below. If you would like to receive a copy of the final study I would be glad to provide you with one once the study is complete. If you have any further questions or would like any further information about the study please contact me at ext. 134.

Thank you,

Matt Wohl

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your signature

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date

**Mount Everett Regional School  
Sheffield, MA 01257**

Dear student and parent/guardian:

This letter is to request your participation in an action research study of the teaching and learning that is taking place in your World Beginnings class. The study will be conducted by Mr. Wohl, and has two purposes: first, to understand how a variety of factors impact the teaching and learning that takes place in that class; and second, to improve his teaching practice.

In signing this statement you are agreeing to allow Mr. Wohl to use your responses and comments in the action research project he is conducting. Those responses and comments will be taped, and will take place during three guided discussions. I have received permission from Mr. Devoti to conduct these discussions during three class periods spread out over three week period. This study may be used, at a later date, in papers and articles prepared for publication in professional and research journals and books. You will not be identified by name, and all reference to particular schools, school districts, and localities will be eliminated or modified to preserve anonymity.

Your participation in the project is voluntary. After signing this consent form you still have the right to withdraw your permission at any time. Please note that the purpose of this study is for me to learn more about my teaching and your learning and not to evaluate you as a student. Participation or non-participation in this study will have no effect on your grades or progress in my class.

If you agree to the above please sign below. If you would like to have a copy of the final study I will provide you with one once the study is complete. If you have any further questions or would like any further information about the study please contact me via phone at (413) 229-8734 ext. 134, or via email at [mwohl@tek2000.net](mailto:mwohl@tek2000.net).

Thank you,

Mr. Wohl

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student's name

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date

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parent/guardian's name

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parent/guardian's signature