Blog Post: How I Got Hooked on Practitioner Research

By Miriam Heller Stern, a colleague with whom we share a strong interest in practitioner research. She is Dean of the Fingerhut School of Education at American Jewish University.

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One of the lessons of the last century of American education reform, a refrain in Larry Cuban’s work, is that change happens in classrooms when teachers make it happen. Policymakers and researchers may tell us what teaching should look like, but teachers have an exclusive insider’s view of the challenges of implementation. The dilemma is: how can we learn valuable lessons from these change agents when their most significant work occurs behind closed doors?

About five years ago, I asked a class of my masters’ students in education in the Working Professionals Program at American Jewish University (then the University of Judaism) to conduct a short action research project, to study and analyze a change they were trying to implement in their classrooms. My hope was that the project would give them the tools to self-evaluate and improve their own practice. The experiment far exceeded my expectations. After 18 months of studying educational theory, the students relished the opportunity to investigate and share their own experience as a source of knowledge. Moreover, as they analyzed and refined their findings together, they became critical colleagues for one another and consumers of each other’s research, collaborating to strengthen their change initiatives.

Given the rich learning opportunities that unfolded, I turned that pilot experiment into a full course. Each year students study a topic of interest to them: implementing numerous strategies for enhancing learning, understanding learners’ paths to spirituality and Jewish identity, navigating gender dynamics in the classroom, and devising new approaches to teaching different content areas like prayer, Bible and Hebrew. Teaching the course has been particularly enriching for me because I have had the opportunity to learn about such a wide array of topics through the eyes of so many teachers. I started teaching practitioner research at a point in my academic career when I was most interested in normative questions based on historical data. My students – they were my teachers, really – steered me into a world of grounded theory arising from rich, dynamic data that was only theirs to access and share. I have come to understand what Donald Freeman means when he calls teacher-research the merging of “the doing and wondering” of teaching. Many of the courses in graduate programs in education focus on either the doing – the “best practices” of teaching – or the wondering – the normative questions about education. Practitioner research allows educators to merge both into one conversation, demanding that both the narrow view of a particular milieu and the big picture of educational practice combine to offer perspective on the question at hand.

The challenge to visionary educators is that innovation demands research and reflection if it is to have staying power. Practitioner research has become an integral component of our
masters’ programs, because we want our students to not only pursue their passions, but to investigate, analyze and deepen their passions while they translate them into practice.