



Do Not Go Gentle Into Practitioner Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

Teacher researchers live at the overlap of theory and practice, consciously inhabiting dual worlds of thought and action. Using a poetic form, the author reflects on her roles as both teacher and student to comment on the pleurably paradoxical structure and freedom involved in the inquiry process. By explaining the creation of her ode to practitioner inquiry within the parameters of the villanelle form, she embraces the significance of the process alongside the product, valuing both elements as vital for truly reflective practice.

Do Not Go Gentle Into Practitioner Inquiry

The journey's long between wondering and inquiry stance,
So do bear in mind, whatever your age,
Systematic and intentional don't happen by chance.

5 Teacher research need not involve IRB and grants,
Yet despite lack of lab coats and mice in a cage,
The journey's long between wondering and inquiry stance.

A diligent gardener who tends all her plants,
The practitioner must determine what data to gauge:
Systematic and intentional don't happen by chance.

10 Data analysis may well cause a few epic rants,
And critical friends can sympathize with the rage.
The journey's long between wondering and inquiry stance.

Inquiry write-ups should provide more than a glance
As vital preparation for the sharing stage.

15 Systematic and intentional don't happen by chance.

Problematizing practice will help you advance,
But don't expect magic at the turn of a page.
The journey's long between wondering and inquiry stance:
Systematic and intentional don't happen by chance.

As a high school English teacher, I felt a self-imposed obligation to introduce my British literature students to representative examples from each of the United Kingdom's constituent countries. Though Dylan Thomas was the lone Welshman on my syllabus, his widely anthologized "Do not go gentle into that good night" was an easy choice beyond its mere convenience. This famous poem resonated with my students, who, as American twelfth graders, stood on the precipice of a vast unknown in the days leading up to graduation. As an optional extra credit assignment, I provided them with a template of the villanelle form and encouraged them to give voice to their feelings. Those who took me up on the offer most often drew from the swirl of emotions arising from the culmination of their K-12 educational journey. Though some were reluctant to consider themselves poets, the lure of bonus points and the comfort of the pattern guided them towards success.

Now, as a first-year doctoral student, I am the one in need of guidance, as I learn how to reconcile my teacher-past with my still inchoate future in order to strategically map out my present. Practitioner inquiry, living at the overlap of theory and practice, is an excellent resource to that end, a framework not unlike the villanelle template I handed to my students. Like the villanelle form, teacher research can be dazzlingly complex. A coach or facilitator must wrestle with how to provide needed structure to practitioners engaging in the process without being too task-oriented or mandate-driven. The amount of effort required might deter would-be participants in much the same way that some of my students doubted their ability to write villanelles. I, too, wondered whether or not I could actually pull it off to achieve the desired product. The template, however, bolstered our attempts and focused our thoughts in an intentional, systematic way, with resultant pride and insight.

The title of my poem reflects the need for teacher researchers to engage in the inquiry process with similarly fierce attentiveness. More than that, of course, my title alludes to Thomas's, and the poem itself incorporates the same villanelle style. Humbly originating from the Italian "*villanella*, a rustic song or dance [and] *villano*, a peasant" (Preminger, 1993, p. 1358), the villanelle is a 19-line poem with an iterative structure in place of more traditional rhyme schemes. I have honored its origins by aligning my villanelle with teacher research, which elevates the lowly practitioner to the level of knower and values local knowledge as critically transformative (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Line 7 reaffirms this view with a nod to Lawrence Stenhouse's characterization of teacher inquirers as gardeners rather than—though no less valid than—large-scale farmers (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014).

The recursive nature of my poem adheres to the villanelle's definitive requirements, but it also ably represents the inquiry cycle, and the rules of the form stand in for the support and structure requisite for high-quality teacher research. Like a well-honed inquiry stance, the villanelle is at once static and dynamic. Critics of the villanelle might decry its formulaic façade, just as teachers might chafe at the seeming restraints of action research. On the whole, however, practitioner researchers thrive only with support, and poets (or students, or teachers-turned-students) who panic at the sight of a blank page can find comfort with a fixed form like the villanelle. Dylan Thomas and others show us that its tight structure need not forbid creativity. The structure becomes a part of, rather than apart from, the message.

For instance, the frequent-flyer words in my poem—journey, wondering, inquiry stance, systematic, and intentional—encapsulate the major elements of practitioner inquiry. These pieces take on added significance because of their repetition. The repeated lines of a villanelle need not monopolize the reader's attention, though. They can serve as a sturdy sort of rhythm to make the aberrant lines all the more noticeable. In my first stanza, for example, I point to practitioner research's applicability at any age, a vital component. Veterans may unwittingly intimidate first-year teachers, but all can benefit from the problematizing of practice, a concept evident in the final stanza. Such disruption of the status quo ironically relies on structural support, just as the awe of the villanelle ultimately comes from its fixed form. Such is what Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) call the "constructive disruption" of inquiry (p. 86).

References

- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (2009). *Inquiry as stance: Practitioner research for the next generation*. New York: Teachers College Press.
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