Lessons from Tony
Betrayal and Trust in Teacher Research

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Tony was a good teacher, and my experience with him and his ultimate refusal to give up ownership of his work shaped my thinking regarding the relationship between the teacher-researcher, her students, and the data that is the work of those students.

Tony came into my classroom early, as usual, limping over to my work table and hoisting up his solid frame. An eighteen-year-old senior, Tony had been in special education since first grade. My writing workshop may have been the first "regular" class, other than physical education and his vocational trade, that he had experienced. His disabilities seemed obvious. He walked with a limp, had minimal use of his right arm, and had a severe speech impediment, characteristics of the cerebral palsy-like condition that affected the right side of his body.

He looked down at the piles of papers and transparencies scattered on the table. As my co-researcher and subject, he knew I was working on a presentation about our work together. I had been tracing some of his writing onto transparencies, and when he read them, he said, "That not right."

The brief poems he had written were part of the best data I had collected on him all year. They were first drafts and almost errorless. I wanted to keep them unrevised as examples of what he could now do without teacher intervention.

Now, as he looked the poems over, he saw an error. I asked him where it was. He pointed to the word "all" and told me it should be "falling." Then he handed me the transparency and said "Fix it." I hesitated, not wanting to change the first-draft status of the work. He repeated, a bit more forcefully, "Fix it."

"But Tony," I said, "I wanted a good sample of your first-draft writing. If I fix it, it won't be a first draft anymore."

He looked me square in the eye and said, "If you don't fix it, you can't use it."

I asked permission to fix it with a different color pen so my audience would still be able to see his first-draft work and he agreed. He read the other transparencies and found another error. I corrected it as he instructed without an argument.

This was the first time Tony had ever denied me the right to use his work, but it would not be the last. As we approached the end of the year, he was demanding that I live up to my claim that he was my co-researcher, my collaborator. He knew that his writing and his spelling had changed, and he knew that his work was his work. He was proud of himself.

Tony's insistence on maintaining control of his writing illustrates an ethical dilemma in teacher research. Who owns student work after it becomes data? Does a signature on an "informed consent" form confer ownership to the researcher? To what extent should the students who are often the subjects of teacher research have a say in how their work is used?

Two years ago, at the National Writing Project meeting in Denver, teacher-researchers gathered for a discussion on ethics. There was general agreement related to a number of issues, but the discussion about ownership was not resolved fully. Some—myself included—argued that students retain ownership and should be consulted regarding the use of their work. Others believed that an informed consent
form granted ownership to the teacher who could then use it freely. One suggested that all student work becomes the property of the teacher and, consequently, the teacher could use it as she sees fit.

That I was appalled by that last notion speaks strongly of my own ethical stance toward teacher research and ownership. I didn't come to that stance easily. Tony taught me right from wrong.

Tony was a good teacher, and my experience with him and his ultimate refusal to give up ownership of his work shaped my thinking regarding the relationship between the teacher-researcher, her students, and the data that is the work of those students.

He taught me that the relationship must be based on truth, honesty, integrity, and a mutual respect. He twice refused to allow me to publish some of his writings. Each time, he had valid reasons, and although he willingly negotiated conditions for using these poems, he was not willing to even discuss the publication of the other piece. In that instance, I respected his decision even though the writing in question was the "breakthrough" piece, representing the point in the year when everything about his writing suddenly changed.

The Research Begins
I began my first teacher-research project, almost by accident, in September of 1988 with a small group of special education seniors who had failed Maryland's required writing assessment in three previous no-fault administrations and who were the first class for whom the test was a graduation requirement. If they did not pass the test this year, they would not graduate. The class had come about as a result of a conversation between my assistant principal and me about how these students might be helped to meet the challenge of the writing test. Because I believed it was more about writing than about a test, I believed that I should be systematic and document their progress. Thus, I had a teacher-research project on my hands.

The class was designed to meet very specific needs of a very specific population, but the students involved were not consulted nor given a choice prior to being placed in the class. Some of them would have preferred taking physical education, but even they reluctantly agreed that it might do them some good to stick around and get more practice with writing.

On the first day of school, I explained that we were going to track their progress and collect data on their growth as writers and that I would need them to help me understand why and how they were learning. I invited them to be my co-researchers. I'm not sure if, at that time, I fully understood the implications of such an invitation. Of course, I wanted to give them additional reasons to "buy in" to the class, and I seriously wanted them to approach the project positively. I had each of them, or their parents if they were not eighteen, sign a consent form agreeing to participate in the research and acknowledging the fact that their work might be included in a future publication related to the research.

On the whole, they were quite cooperative. They seemed genuinely pleased with the different kind of attention they got from my approach to the class. Because I was not a special education teacher, I didn't have to implement their Individual Education Programs (IEPs), and I could take them in directions they had not gone before with writing. They offered one another support and encouragement, and a close-knit community developed during that first semester when we worked together. They were willing to offer insights into their thinking and to examine their learning closely. They told me what worked and what didn't. At times they struggled, but at other times they virtually took flight. For me, it was a most amazing experience.

In January, the writing test would be given and if they failed it again, there would be no opportunity to take it again until the summer. They knew their graduation hung by that thread, and they took their expectations seriously. When the semester ended, they would go off to their elective classes—phys ed, music—and I would teach creative writing, a writing workshop available to the general school population.

Tony was one of ten students assigned to the original class. My goals for the teacher-research project were to provide multiple opportunities to write using the writing process, to identify errors and patterns of error, to track their progress, and to determine the individual writing strategies each of them needed to succeed on the test. The identification and internalization of personal strategies would be important, because they would need to access those strategies independent of teacher guidance and support to be successful on the test.

Although my research plan was about finding key strategies for each of the students, along the way, one boy, David, emerged as a potential case study. I began to track him more closely. He and Tony were the two for whom the test would be the biggest challenge. At first, Tony did not stand out either behaviorally or with his writing progress—at least I failed to notice his progress. He plugged along, complaining about revision, and interrupting from time to time to demand the correct spelling of a word. To be honest, in spite of my
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When I recognized the evidence in my journal, I began to observe him more closely. I saw evidence of higher-level thinking, specifically in regard to his efforts to help listeners deal with his speech impairment. Whenever anyone had trouble understanding him, he would patiently repeat, first trying to pronounce more carefully. If that failed, he might try to spell the word or give the first letters; if success still eluded his listener, he would try defining the word, using a synonym, or reading the context if he was working with a draft. I saw these as sophisticated communication strategies.

I began to believe that his use of these compensatory strategies represented higher-level thinking. Seen in that light, Tony was analyzing his listener’s predicament and choosing alternative methods of communicating the word or words in question. If his awareness of his inadequate spoken language meant that he had a conscious awareness of what correct language should sound like, did that hold the key to improving his skills? It was a question that begged for an answer. This new understanding of Tony’s language awareness did, in fact, lead us to the writing strategy that would liberate his inner voice.

The Researcher’s Dilemma

Data is, of course, at the heart of teacher research. But how far should we go to capture the data that we think we need? In our quest for the most authoritative and powerful data to answer our questions, do we ever cross the line and betray our students’ trust? I did.

All of the students except Tony had agreed to have some of their writing conferences taped. Tony’s refusal was, of course, related to his speech. He understandably didn’t want it on tape. However, I needed a way to capture his awareness of correct speech as data; I needed to document it.

These conferences, I believed, were important data, and I wanted to record all of them. Of course, I had agreed not to tape Tony, but I knew that I would never be able to reconstruct our conference from memory. I needed that documentation. That fact outweighed ethical considerations, so I betrayed him. I hid my small microcassette recorder in my pocket and recorded the conference. At the end of the conference, I knew I had some very valuable data, and I felt guilty. Fortunately, I wasn’t so despicable that I would use it without his permission. Was I thinking like an ethical researcher (after the fact!) or was I worried that Tony would discover my betrayal later? It’s painful to admit it, but perhaps it was the latter. I took the tape recorder from my pocket and laid it on the desk, admitting what I had done. Tony looked stricken, and although I felt awful, I didn’t want to lose the data, so I had to persuade him to let me use it. I promised Tony that no one but me would ever hear the tape and that I’d like to make a written transcript of it since it had some very important information on it. I promised that if he did not like what he read in the transcript, he could have the tape and I would not use the information. He agreed and I was delighted, all my guilt swept away.

I don’t know what I would have done if he had refused. Would I have used it anyway?

I’m sure that if Tony wanted to say no to me that day, he couldn’t do it. It’s easy for me to say that I was right, based on the value of the data and Tony’s ultimate forgiveness of my betrayal, but even now I wonder to what degree I manipulated him into doing just what I wanted him to do. In many ways, during that year, I was guilty of underesti-
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mating Tony. Thankfully, he didn’t always let me get away with it.

**Tony’s Breakthrough**

The writing test came and went. I read Tony’s test before it was sent out for scoring, and I knew it would fail. I had seriously believed he would do better than he did, but one of the test prompts led him to writing about something that was personally painful for him, and he couldn’t handle the emotion and the writing simultaneously. All of the students knew I had read their tests, and they wanted to know how I would score them. It was hard telling Tony I believed he would fail once more.

Even before this, however, he had decided he would stay with me for the second semester of creative writing workshop. He was one of just two students who elected to stay. He said he wanted to continue working on his writing, but I really think he felt a sense of importance and security in my class that he had not experienced before, and he didn’t want to give that up.

Routinely, students in the creative writing workshop began the period with freewriting in their journals. At the end of each week, I collected their journals for my response. One week, early in that second semester, I was shocked by what I read in Tony’s journal. (See Figure 1.)

It was actually a return to something he had mentioned in his journal during the first semester and then had put away, a retrospective on his childhood in Baltimore near Federal Hill where he had lived. I had never read anything of Tony’s—even his edited work—that was anywhere near as fluent. Nor had he ever produced anything so technically accurate—no spelling errors and only one minor semantic error. From my own observation notes, I knew that he had not asked me or anyone else for spelling assistance, that he had worked quietly and intently on this journal entry. Where had this voice come from?

There was a thoughtful quality, bordering on the poetic, that had emerged with this piece. It may have been the first thing he had ever written that was personally important to him. It had come from deep within; it stirred him, and the voice spoke more clearly and articulately than ever before. When I encouraged him to explore this topic further, to elaborate and to tell his Federal Hill stories, he became upset. He vehemently refused and was upset with himself for even writing this much. He was reluctant to share it with others, perhaps afraid somehow that they would be able to understand—even though he couldn’t—things he wanted to remember, or perhaps to forget. I didn’t press the issue and let it drop.

In the meantime, believing my research project was coming to a close, I had begun to analyze my student’s data in light of their educational backgrounds. It was time to examine student confidential files to gather more data to compare with what I had collected. In reading about Tony’s background, I understood more clearly the importance—and the pain—of the Federal Hill piece. Both of Tony’s parents had died when he lived at Federal Hill, and he had been bounced from foster home to foster home since then, rarely seeing or even knowing the whereabouts of his brothers.

I grew up in Baltimore City. I lived a block away from the Inner Harbor over top of a barber shop. I used to go to school close by Federal Hill park. You can walk to Federal Hill park from my old school. The Federal Hill park has a REC area up there. Me and my brothers went to the park to play game everyday after school and on the weekend. I am going back where I grew up and see my old friends and see if the barber shop is still there. I am going up to the park and think about my past. I like to stand at Federal Hill park and look over the water and see Fort McHenry from the park.

**Figure 1.** Tony's Federal Hill piece marked a breakthrough in his writing.

During the second semester, I began to document real achievement and growth in Tony’s fluency and accuracy that was clearly inconsistent with expectations defined by previous intelligence test data. Though still frequently dependent on others for spelling, he became the most prolific of all students in the creative writing class, which included students from all grade levels and abilities—with only one other from special education. By April, Tony’s writing showed drastic improvement, though the thoughtful Federal Hill voice remained suppressed.

During the creative writing class, one of his best writings was a series of poems on the seasons. He had written the first one, “Spring,” earlier in the semester, and in May he decided to do one for each of the remaining seasons (See Figure 2). This time, I told him they were fine just as written in the first draft. Because I usually sent him back to look for his typical errors, he was at first delighted, and then suspicious. He asked, “I don’t have to revise them?” I told him I was happy with them as they were. I did not tell him they were perfect—they weren’t, but they represented...
the best first-draft writing he had ever done, and I wanted to keep them that way as examples of what he could do with very little teacher intervention. I chose not to explain my thinking to him, being consciously deceptive, fearful that he would demand correction and compromise the data that illustrated how far he had come with his first-draft writing. I had relegated him back to “subject,” failing to trust him as my collaborator and informant.

It was these poems traced onto transparencies that he demanded we correct. I was shocked by his threat that I could not use the work without correcting it, but I knew he was right. Why couldn’t I have included him in the interpretation and discussed with him the best way to represent his first-draft work? After all, in the first semester, he and the other students had often participated in the analysis of the data. In the end, the issue was successfully resolved, with his first draft—and his pride—preserved. But again, I had betrayed his trust, and this time, he did not let me off the hook. In spite of myself, I was proud of him.

**Tony’s Second Refusal**

The second time he refused to allow me to use his work, I could do nothing but agree. There was no alternative; there was no persuading (or manipulating) him. I did not even try.

I had written my first draft of Tony’s case study before the end of the school year. In it, I had followed his writing progress from the first day of school through his May poems, demonstrating my initial failure to recognize what was happening and emphasizing how the Federal Hill piece had seemed to be a breakthrough for both Tony and me. I invited him to sit with me one afternoon and listen to the draft. (His firm reminder previously, I was startled and puzzled by his reaction. He told me that I could not put that piece into the paper. Even as I lamely pointed out its importance to his journey through the year, I knew his pain was real. I agreed and told him I would revise the article and omit any reference to that piece of writing. It was hard for me to do, because I believed that single piece of writing was the clearest possible evidence that he had within him a clear, articulate, and unimpeded voice. Even as his work had become technically better, the thoughtful, fluent voice had never reemerged in other writing. It was the treasure. And it was once again buried.

Later, during the summer, I called Tony to tell him I had finished the article and I wanted to come and read it to him for his final approval. He had moved back to Baltimore City with a foster family from his early childhood. Tony and I sat at the kitchen table, along with his foster family, and I read the story aloud for all of them. When I finished, I looked up at Tony for his comment, and he said, “Put Federal Hill back in.”

Once again, he had shocked and puzzled me. Once again, he reminded me he was my co-researcher and informant, as much as my subject. I was relieved, and when I asked him why he had changed his mind, he said, simply, “It needs to be there.”

Perhaps it was a combination of things. Maybe he recognized how its lack affected the overall impact of his story. Maybe he felt better about himself now that he was legally independent of the foster care system, but
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back in Baltimore with a family who cared enough about him to give him a home. Maybe sufficient time had passed to soften the pain his memories of Federal Hill had brought. Maybe he was testing me. Whatever it was, I'm grateful that I can share his whole story with others, but even more so, I'm grateful for what he taught me about the relationship between the teacher-researcher and her students.

Ethics in Teacher Research

Much has been written about ethics in research. It is not difficult to find articles and books dealing with the issues raised when researchers anywhere examine the work and behavior of others in order to answer questions. Most commonly, in regard to action research, one may find resources that explore the ethics involved in university/public school partnerships, that is, insider-outsider research. For example, Thomas Newkirk cautions us that researchers “... have a special obligation to recognize the vulnerability of those they study” (5). While he is specifically speaking of the teacher as the vulnerable individual in this relationship with the university researcher, it is no less true that in teacher research the students are vulnerable. Our students are at the mercy of our questions and the decisions we make regarding the use and representation of the data collected. When we represent their work and their behaviors through our data, it is they, perhaps more than ourselves, whom we make public.

Teacher research is distinguished by the fact that it is insider research. The teacher researches while she teaches; she does not quit teaching in order to complete the research. The goal, then, is to improve practice and enhance student learning (Van den Berg, 85). This circumstance changes the dynamic of researcher-subject relationships and obliges the teacher-researcher to be up front with her students during the progress of the research.

In my continuing work with teacher research and with teacher-researchers, the lessons Tony taught me take a prominent position. I regularly engage my novice teacher-researchers in conversations about ethics. I encourage them to share their research with their students, to involve them in the collection and analysis of data, to grant them status as co-researchers during the project. It is not a simple thing to do, and it requires not only acknowledging that we can learn a great deal from them, but also relinquishing some degree of power to them. I believe strongly that we have a responsibility to them to respect and honor their integrity.

In a truly collaborative relationship, “the researcher and the informants participate as a team; they become co-researchers who explore an issue of common interest and concern. They co-author the research questions, co-collect, co-analyze, and co-interpret the data, and they co-construct the final products (e.g., written reports, public presentations). ...They learn to respect one another’s perspective and honor one another’s trust” (Williams, 51). Again, this relationship is possible in the realm of teacher research. In some regards, I succeeded in doing this with Tony, but only insofar as he was able to keep me focused on our relationship as he understood it. And, I must remember, that it was I who defined our relationship as collaborators to begin with. He believed me, and he used that understanding to keep me on the straight and narrow whenever I strayed.

I believe strongly in the value of collaboration between the researcher and her informants. In fact, even though I have used it here many times, I dislike the commonly used word “subject”—a term that suggests a relationship of power and submission, that implies that research is done on or to someone, not with them. After all, quite often teacher research is as much about the teacher and her practice as it is about the students and their learning. I think my own failures with Tony were the result of my viewing him as a subject rather than an informant.

Owen Van de Berg points out that even the notion of protecting student privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity, which are critical to any research project, “presupposes an unequal relationship between the researcher and the people he or she claims to be researching with (if the claim is that the work is collaborative).” He goes on to compare the subjects of research to those of the prerevolutionary French kings and calls the relationship “feudal” (85). His preferred term for participants in research is “inhabitants,” and he advocates involving them fully along the continuum of data collection, analysis, and publication.

“Informant,” a term I prefer, suggests a collaborative, mutually beneficial relationship. When possible and appropriate, students should speak for themselves, rather than being spoken for through the voices of teacher-researchers. Looking back, I am struck by the irony of my simultaneous efforts to liberate and to stifle Tony’s voice in our research project. I’m glad he won in the end.

While the development of a code of ethics for teacher-researchers may address some of our concerns about how students are viewed and treated within the area of teacher research, it is often the case that teacher-researchers and the school systems that encourage their work have not
developed clear guidelines. Even so, it is not likely that such guidelines, when written, will recommend that teacher research be conducted as a collaboration with students. Nor do they always provide clear definitions of the students’ roles in the process. Typically, the guidelines include issues related to the teacher-researcher role (which may promote open communication with the students), research plans, data collection, research results, and publication. Marian Mohr’s discussion of the development of a statement of ethics in teacher research supports the notion of collaboration but does not imply that in all cases collaboration is a requirement (9-10). Nor should it be. Teacher-researchers will have to make their own decisions based on their beliefs, as well as what is permitted in their school systems and how their practices can comply with such codes.

Generally, obtaining permission for the research is of paramount importance in all circumstances. Nevertheless, we must remember that the consent form does not bestow upon us the rights and privileges of a demigod. In my case, most of my students were eighteen and were able to sign their own consent forms, even though their parents were fully informed as well. I was working with students for whom graduation was at stake. How could they refuse? Are special education students and their parents more vulnerable than others when the stakes are so high? Newkirk pointedly reminds us of the power of the consent form:

The consent form tends to heighten the sense of importance of the study about to be undertaken, and, most significantly, by being filled with assurances it stresses our own benevolence. Then, in a moment of great irony, the subject signs a form indicating he or she was fully informed—even though the American Psychological Association grants researchers the right to deceive in the interests of science (5).

In my view, there is no room in teacher research for deception. My own behavior with Tony was inexcusable, in spite of the fact that he forgave me my sins. If we deceive our students, it is not just our character we must question; I believe deception can taint our findings. I had thought at one time that Tony was not a good candidate for a case study because he was likely to fail the writing test. I was looking for the successful project. I was looking for the one who would make me look good. I wanted to do my case study on David, who seemed to have a better, though slim, chance of passing. It was a gamble, but the odds were better. But now I have two case studies. I have David’s, which is interesting enough—he made some good progress, but still failed the test. And then there’s Tony’s case study. He, too, made good progress, and he, too, failed the test. But his case study is less about preparing to take a writing test than it is about self-discovery—his and mine.

What I learned from Tony was to have far-reaching implications for my teaching practice—whether conducting teacher research or not, whether teaching high school, university, or graduate students. I learned to listen more closely to my students’ voices, to respect those voices, and to remember who owns the work they produce on behalf of my instruction. I learned that if I invite my students to participate with me in teacher research, I have to mean it. And I learned that even if student work is data, their right of ownership must be respected within the process of teacher research.

While I hope what he learned from me has served him well in the years since we worked together on this project, I know that what I learned from him is the most valuable lesson of all. Thanks, Tony.

Author’s note: Because of their failure to properly communicate information about a change in scoring procedures, state officials decided to delay implementation of the test as a graduation requirement. As a result, both David and Tony were able to graduate even though they failed the writing test once again.

References


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