An Interview with Jeff Wilhelm

By: Ruth Devlin

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Summary: Ruth Devlin, co-chair of the TIC Network, interviews author Jeff Wilhelm.

In March 2003, the Teacher Inquiry Communities (TIC) Network will sponsor an NWP Authors and Issues Online Conference, featuring Jeff Wilhelm and Tanya Baker from the Maine Writing Project. Wilhelm and Baker, along with Julie Dube, are the authors and researchers of Strategic Reading: Guiding Students to Lifelong Literacy, 6-12. *Wilhelm is the co-author of* Reading Don't Fix No Chevys, *an investigation of literacy and young men. Ruth Devlin, co-chair of the TIC Network, interviewed Wilhelm between sessions at the NWP 2002 Annual Conference in Atlanta, Georgia. The following is a transcript of their conversation.*

RD: Could you talk a little bit about who you are and where you've been as a teacher?

JW: Well, I taught high school for seven years—taught English and speech and writing. And then I spent six years as a full-time middle school teacher of reading/language arts. And for the last eight years, I've been at the University of Maine as a professor of literacy education, and during that time I've been associated with professional development sites, so I'm actually in schools. I teach my preservice teaching students at schools, and I teach kids in schools, and work with teachers at schools, so I'm still very school-based. And I've been doing teacher research in schools for probably about twelve years now. I did several studies when I was a full-time teacher around reading and drama and art and technology—mostly to assist and engage really reluctant kids and really struggling readers. I taught for six years in what was called the Exceptional Educational Needs House in my school, so we had all the kids who were labeled ED, LD, ESL, ADHD . . .

RD: They have acronyms for everything.

JW: Oh, yeah. They do. And . . . I don't know if everybody has the labels, but everybody's got the kids. So I became very interested in what expert readers and engaged learners do and how resistant learners or unengaged readers might be helped to do the same thing. So I did a lot of intervention studies with reading, drama, art, and technology as ways of assisting readers and learners. And since I've been at the university, I've continued to do teacher research stuff.

My latest study, which I [did] with Michael Smith, was called *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys,* about the literate lives of boys. . . . One of my sites was the school where I go every day, so I knew the kids, and it was natural for me to be there, and I followed them around, you know, and even had some of them as students in classes I was teaching. And my other site was a school where I had taught, so I was very familiar with that school as well. So I felt that even that was a form of teacher research. It came out of my concerns as a teacher. The study was done as a natural part of the school day. You know, now that we're working on interventions, we're doing it as teachers in the context of classrooms. . . . I'm interested in what can help teachers to help kids, and, of course, teachers work in schools, so that's where I like to do my data collection. I like to make it a natural part of my teaching. I like to make it a natural part of the school day, and I like to do it over time, because I think that it's very important to have studies that don't just give a snapshot, just one intervention, just one day, but that look at kids over time. So that's kind of where I've been, and where I'm at right now.

RD: So the thing that led you to become [the kind of] teacher who questioned your practice was the students with whom you were working—those who were considered reluctant or who appeared reluctant as readers.

JW: I remember, of course through the haze of memory, that I felt pretty successful as a teacher. And when I went to teach middle school, one of my jobs was to teach two courses in eighth grade remedial reading. And nothing that had been successful for me before worked with them. And so I had to ask, "What's going on?" And I think one knee-jerk reaction was to say, "The kids are broke." Another was to say, "I'm broke." But still another was to say, "Maybe I don't fully understand the situation," or "Maybe things could be different," or "Maybe I'm not broke, and they're not broke. Maybe the way I'm doing things is broke."

And so they were really the groups that encouraged me to start reflecting really hard. And at the same time that I'm struggling with them, I'm having these great classes. That was really my first study, *You Gotta BE the Book,* where I looked at three really engaged readers, and looked at all the things they did when they read, and then I started looking at my unengaged readers and found they weren't doing any of those things, and then starting to search for interventions that would assist the unengaged readers to do the same kinds of things. So, really, all my studies have been similar to that in that it's a question that has arisen out of my practice—a problem, an issue I've seen, something that's nagging me, usually right in my face. And then they've always kind of erupted almost into a series of studies, because once you start learning stuff, then you go, "So what? What now? What can you do? Ok, I've found that out, but how do we change things?" And so every time I've done

descriptive studies, they've always gone on to all these intervention studies of looking at, "Well, what might we do differently?"

You know, it's interesting. I was getting my PhD. at the University of Wisconsin, and I was a full-time teacher. And I went into a cohort where everybody else was a full-time graduate student. And I finished first. And people would say, "Well, how'd that happen? I mean, they were completely dedicating themselves to graduate studies. You were doing it one or two classes at a time." And what happened was, I think, was that when it came time to do the dissertation everybody stumbled, "What do I ask? What's important?" I had no trouble. I knew what to ask. I had all these kids right in front of me who were driving me crazy . . . I think that really assisted me, because all my research was totally contextualized in the fabric of my life. And my research wasn't something extra I did. It was part and parcel of my everyday teaching. And, you know, that's something I've contended about teacher research—that it can't be something extra. It's got to be a natural part of what you do. If it's something extra, we won't do it. We're all too busy. But if it's part of what you do, and it helps you to do that better, then you'll do it. The other thing I really struggled with in *You Gotta BE the Book*—and I wrote quite excessively about that—is how to make the research a natural part of your teaching, a natural part of your assessment, something you would have to do anyway, and it helps you do it in a better way.

RD: So for those teacher who are lamenting the fact that they don't have enough time to do teacher research you would say, "Make it a part of what you do."

JW: I would say that you can do your job better and more efficiently and faster by becoming a reflective practitioner who does teacher research. I've certainly found that to be the case for me.

RD: I would like to ask you some questions about plans you have for Authors and Issues in March. What thoughts do you have about the notion of an online conference—the benefits or pitfalls?

JW: Well, I've done a couple, and I would say the benefits are you have an asynchronous conversation where people can think about what's been said, and kind of turn it over, and then respond later. You know, so it doesn't require an immediate response. I think, something that's a cost and a benefit, is you always get a lot of people who lurk and who don't contribute, and so I really encourage people who are lurking, if they've got a question or concern or a comment, to throw it in, because you know, an online community depends on the conversation—that's its life blood. And I understand that some people prefer to lurk, but I think that it's richer for everybody if everybody . . . puts their oar in, or

says "What about this?" or "Here's something" or. . . .

You know, when I've done it before, I typically have a few ideas I might throw out—and questions. And I might have five or six in my arsenal, and I'll always start it off with one, but I'm very hopeful that the conversation will ensue, and the questions will come out of people's concerns. So it won't be me really running it, I'll just be kind of facilitating it. But, you know, sometimes things slow down, and so I'll throw something in, or, you know, try to make it a natural segue with what's been done. But, you know, that's the nice thing about an online community, too; things can come up in the context of people's teaching lives that they can then articulate and get feedback about. I think a lot of times in schools we close our doors, and we kill our own snakes. And we might not have people in our school who we trust or who can help us. And so that's a nice thing about an online community . . . that you have people who may be several states away who are thinking hard about the same things you are, who might be able to offer you an angle or advice, and so I think it can be a very, very useful thing.

RD: Who will you be joining you online? I know of Tanya Baker, but are there any others?

JW: I'm totally open. Tanya is someone who's a teacher-researcher who works with me, and co-directs at our site [Maine Writing Project]. I'd be real happy to have Ryan [Mahan] and Averill [Lovely] maybe jump in. They're young teachers who are doing very particular types of projects. So, I think the more the merrier.

RD: At this particular moment, what sorts of topics are you thinking about [to generate] conversation?

JW: Well, like, where do our research questions come from? How can we find or adapt methods that are very natural to our teaching—that actually are instructive to the kids, instead of being something extra that we're doing? So, you know, those are things I was going to talk about. I also wanted to think about the role of professionals in professional conversations. I mean, what is our obligation to create and disseminate knowledge? And how can we do that? You know, online community is one way—publication, presentation. Or is this something that we should just . . . is it ok that we just do it for ourselves? I kind of want to throw some things out about that. Like, if we do research, so what? What happens then?

RD: And, "Who cares? "

JW: Yeah. Is it ok if it's just for ourselves, or do we have a wider obligation? You know, I think there are a lot of issues around professionalism . . . I thought I might throw something out about standards,

and what's the role of teacher research in an age of standards. In the state of Maine where I am, for instance, the law requires an alternative performance assessment which segues beautifully with teacher research. So the teachers basically have to do a teacher research project, in my opinion, and that's supposed to have equal weight with the state standardized test. So, it really gives a leg up to people and to the students of teachers who can do this kind of work, and can make a case—hey, these kids may not have done that great on the test, but look what they have learned on their own. Look at their learning and actual accomplishment. So, I think there's a real challenge, but a real opportunity to teacher-researchers—getting kids to do their own research and their own learning. Having them help with coding their work to the state learning results, for instance, so that they could tell anybody who came to visit, "I have met the state learning results. This is how I did it." I think there are a lot of opportunities and a lot of ways that standards coupled with teacher research could become levers for change. So I want to talk about that some as well.

RD: If you were to have a couple of sentences about how a person could get started with teacher research—and I know that that's a huge notion—how would a person get started with teacher research?

JW: I think first of all, write down your questions. Write down the things that bug you, that are bothering you. The things that keep you awake at night or keep you in the shower a little bit longer. I think journaling . . . observation, just keeping some notes about a short episode. Or reflecting afterwards [about] something that happened and trying to explore it, you know just kind of pick it apart. I think picking critical incidents—something that went really well or something that really went wrong—I think there are critical incidents in our teaching lives, which we could focus on, and use that as a way to get started. Why did that happen? What happened before that caused that to happen? How might I get it to happen again or keep it from happening again? Thinking about what counts in your classroom. What demonstrates learning, and how might you analyze those artifacts in a way that could convince others that learning has occurred? You know, we're all in this position of having to prove that our kids learn. Why not do it in a way that fits what we know about human motivation?

Like the flow stuff.

I don't see tests as in any way natural. I see them as totally false. I think life is filled with testing situations in which people prove whether they've . . . whether they can do something or to what extent they can do something. We're faced with testing situations everyday in which the proof of our ability is how well we do, and how far we succeed, and how much we can prove before the next day. I think teacher-researchers are a real force for change in that they grasp those artifacts—that evidence

of student learning, of progress—and wield it to make arguments, or make cases, or think with, so I don't think that being a teacher-researcher is a radical change. I think that it's something that we all do to a certain extent, but that maybe we haven't formalized enough. Maybe we haven't pursued as much as we could, but I think that there's a lot of things going in education that should encourage us to do it, and that would allow us to retake some of our professional authority. So, you know, questioning, note taking, thinking hard . . . those are things that good teachers do, and I think with some teacher research tools that it becomes very easy and very natural. You know, I look at Ryan [Mahan] doing his camp and teaching his class. He's researching every day. He's thinking, "How is this going? What's going wrong? What can I do next? How will I know that works?" He's thinking like a teacher-researcher. And if he collects the data, and wields the data in a way that can be used in an argument, or make a case, then that's teacher research.

RD: Thanks so much for taking the time to talk with me. We all look forward to your online event in March.

JW: You're welcome.

Link to the [Heinemann](#) and [Teachers College Press](#) websites to learn more about the books mentioned in this interview.

[Reading Don't Fix No Chevys](#) - Michael Smith and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm (Heinemann 2002).

[You Gotta BE the Book,](#) Jeffrey D. Wilhelm (Teachers College Press 1997).

[Strategic Reading,](#) Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, Tanya N. Baker, and Julie Dube (Heinemann 2001).