University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Archives of Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education

Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education

10-1-1989

Teaching Excellence: TOWARD THE BEST IN THE ACADEMY, Fall 1989 [B]

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podarchives

Part of the Higher Education and Teaching Commons

"Teaching Excellence: TOWARD THE BEST IN THE ACADEMY, Fall 1989 [B]" (1989). *Archives of Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education.* Paper 13.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podarchives/13

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Archives of Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Teaching Excellence

Distributed courtesy of:

THE CENTER FOR TEACHING EXCELLENCE
University of Hawaii at Manoa
1733 Donaghho Road, Kuykendall 107
Honolulu, HI 96822

TOWARD THE BEST IN THE ACADEMY

Fall 1989

Reforming Undergraduate Education One Class at a Time*

A continuing question for those of us in education is—What can and should be done to improve the quality of undergraduate instruction? The reports that constitute the higher education reform movement of the 1980's have taken this as their major emphasis. However, while these reports express plenty of dissatisfaction with the quality of instruction, there are few constructive suggestions for what to do about it.

Part of the problem is that there is an unexamined assumption that underlies most of the educational reform movement. It is that educational reform consists of making large highly visible policy decisions, such as installation of statewide testing or intensive systems. There is very little attention given to the potential impact of thousands of small classroom reforms that might add up to real and substantial change. We fail to consider what each teacher acting in his or her own classroom might do to achieve reform.

I propose that the biggest and most long-lasting reform of undergraduate education will come when individual faculty or small groups of instructors adopt the view of themselves as reformers within their immediate sphere of influence, the classes they teach every day. I believe that it is time for classroom teachers to seize the initiative and begin doing the type of research that will improve the learning of their own students. I call this *Classroom Research*. The purpose of classroom research is to help teachers evaluate their own instructional effectiveness, to explore new solutions to the problems of their own students, and to foster intellectual stimulation and professional renewal for themselves as teachers.

The concept of classroom research springs from six basic assumptions:

1. The quality of student learning is directly related to the quality of instruction.

2. That teachers need to know what their student are learning in their classrooms.

3. That inquiry and intellectual challenge are sources of professional renewal for teachers.

4. That the research most likely to improve instruction is that conducted by classroom teachers formulating and investigating questions that they want answered.

5. That self-improvement is most likely to result from specific feedback relevant to one's own goals and behaviors.

6. That there is nothing so mysterious or esoteric about research on college teaching that it cannot be done by anyone capable of teaching at the college level.

Let me give a concrete example of what classroom research might look like. Let us assume that our classroom teacher is curious about the dropout problem, decides to interview some students who stopped coming to class, and finds out that a certain amount of discouragement sets as the semester's work begins to build. As she reflects on this observation, it occurs to her that she usually hits her stride as a teacher about the fifth week of the semester and feels ready to tackle some of the more difficult units about that time. She notes that the high dropout rate in her own classes occurs about five weeks into the school year, and she concludes that she might try a number of things in her own classroom to reduce needless dropouts—perhaps give an especially satisfying assignment, maybe rework or reschedule the difficult unit, maybe call in a few students and talk with them about the unit or about the class, perhaps offer special encouragement, make a referral, drop a note, make a call.

Another type of classroom research that might be of interest to individual instructors would involve

(Continued on back)

*This article was adapted from K. Patricia Cross, "The Need for Classroom Research," in *To Improve the Academy*, J.K. Kurfiss (ed.). Stillwater, OK: POD Network in Higher Education and New Forums Press, Inc., 1987.

the use of "feedback devices" to help tell them how students are responding to classroom procedures. We have gathered a collection of such devices into a single sourcebook entitled *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for Faculty* (Cross and Angelo, 1988). Such devices could help an instructor discover whether a "review session" prior to the mid-term helps in long-term retention or is only useful for immediate test score gains. Or perhaps the teacher is interested in knowing whether a field trip is worth the effort in changing attitudes about a particular social problem—or would reading about it or discussing it or seeing a dramatization or videotape work as well or better? The devices include such simple ideas as focused listing, the one-minute paper, and the teacher-student electronic mail system.

Alternatively, small groups of faculty might band together within or between departments to research such things as what activities promote cross-course integration. Faculty meetings might well be planned around classroom research projects to share data, perceptions, and possible solutions. The emphasis in faculty meetings would be on the use of data and systematic observation; discussion might appropriately range from sharing useful and creative approaches to gathering data, to data analysis, to recommendations for possible changes in policies and practices within the department.

While the examples I have presented do not generally call for complicated methodologies or analyses, there is nothing to prevent interested teachers from studying very complex problems. The projects for classroom research are limited only by the teachers' imagination. The procedure of the classroom researcher is to formulate the question, collect data, reflect on classroom practice, try a solution and evaluate the results. There is nothing especially new about those methods; they are frequently recommended for huge, well-funded "R and D." The difference is that teacher motivation is enhanced through classroom research because the question for study is framed by the teacher, and implementation is facilitated because there is no gap between "researcher" and "practitioner".

In conclusion, I think it is time for classroom teachers to become directly involved in the study of teaching and learning. They should be intellectually curious about it as well as professionally involved in the improvement of their own teaching practices. It is these teacher-driven changes in the every day life of undergraduate classes which hold the greatest promise for long-term educational reform.

K. Patricia Cross
University of California-Berkeley

References

K. Patricia Cross and Thomas A. Angelo. *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for Faculty.* Technical Report No. 88-A-004.0. Ann Arbor, Michigan: National Center for Research to Improve Postsecondary Teaching and Learning, The University of Michigan, 1988.

For further information, contact the author at the Classroom Research Project, University of California-Berkeley, Berkeley, CA 94720. (415) 642-0709.

A Publication of The Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education

Editor:
Loren Ekroth, Center for Teaching Excellence, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1733 Donaghho Road, Kuykendall Hall 108, Honolulu, HI 96822

Associate Editors:
Sandra Tomlinson, Galveston College, 4015 Avenue Q, Galveston, TX 77550
Marilla Svinicki, Center for Teaching Excellence, University of Texas-Austin, Main Bldg. 2200, Austin, TX 78712-1111

Subscriptions: Institutional, $100 annually (unlimited reproduction rights); Individual, $10 annually. *Teaching Excellence* is published eight time annually. To order, send check or P. O. to Teaching Excellence, c/o Loren Ekroth, Center for Teaching Excellence, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1733 Donaghho Road, Kuykendall Hall 108, Honolulu, HI 96822, or call (808) 948-6978 for further information.

The POD Network facilitates the exchange of information and ideas, the development of professional skills, the exploration and debate of educational issues, and the sharing of expertise and resources. For further information, write to:

Dr. Delivee Wright
POD Network
Teaching and Learning Center
University of Nebraska
121 Benton Hall
Lincoln, NE 68588