

1988

## Notes on a Classroom Research Program

Bette LaSere Erickson

Glenn R. Erickson

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podimproveacad>



Part of the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

---

LaSere Erickson, Bette and Erickson, Glenn R., "Notes on a Classroom Research Program" (1988). *To Improve the Academy*. 147.  
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podimproveacad/147>

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 To Improve the Academy by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

# Notes on a Classroom Research Program

**Bette LaSere Erickson & Glenn R. Erickson**

The University of Rhode Island

Sometimes, when you least expect it, a good idea stands up, introduces itself, and asks to be recognized. So it happened two years ago at the AAHE meetings. Pat Cross was urging us all to take teaching seriously – not a particularly novel idea for POD folks – but we sat up and took notice when she proposed:

What is needed if higher education is to move toward our goal of maximum student learning is a new breed of college teacher that I shall call a Classroom Researcher. A Classroom Researcher is one who uses the classroom as a laboratory, collecting data and using a variety of research methodologies appropriate to the study of teaching and learning in his or her particular discipline. (Cross, 1986a, p. 10).

Classroom research sounded like an idea worth knowing better, so the POD Network asked Pat Cross to elaborate what she had in mind at their national conference later that year. “The purpose of classroom research,” she explained, “is to help the teacher evaluate his or her effectiveness as a teacher and to foster intellectual stimulation and professional renewal for college teachers” (1986b, p. 12). Traditional educational research searches for effective teaching and learning practices that are generalizable across classrooms; classroom research seeks answers to situation-specific questions that faculty have. “The procedure of the classroom researcher is to formulate the question, collect data, reflect on classroom practices, try a solution, and evaluate the results” (1986b, p. 13-14).

---

From *To Improve the Academy: Resources for Student, Faculty, and Institutional Development*, Vol. 7. Edited by J. Kurfiss, L. Hilsen, S. Kahn, M.D. Sorcinelli, and R. Tiberius. POD/New Forums Press, 1988.

The procedures for classroom research sounded similar to activities we undertake in consultations with faculty, but the emphasis upon seeking answers to the questions faculty raise is a different agenda than most of us pursue when we're working with faculty to improve their teaching. Classroom research seemed like an idea worth trying out.

For the Instructional Development Program at the University of Rhode Island, classroom research offered focus and direction for a program we had been struggling to develop. For ten years, we had offered what we call the Teaching Fellows Program – a collection of activities that includes a week-long course planning workshop, a seminar that meets every other week during the academic year, and the individual consultation that is the cornerstone of our services. Each year, the Teaching Fellows Program provides an opportunity for 12 to 15 faculty to catch up on the research on college teaching and learning, to explore a variety of teaching methods, to try some of them in their classes, and to meet regularly to exchange ideas and strategies. It's an intensive program and a continuing one, so it's not surprising that faculty come to depend on it for ideas, support, and energy. Nor is it surprising that when the year concludes, faculty begin to miss the stimulation, the camaraderie, and the regularity of informed conversations about teaching.

By 1986, about 125 faculty had participated in the Fellows Program, and calls for a follow-up program were becoming louder. We had not responded to those requests, because we had not found a focus or structure or something that could be regarded as a *raison d'être*. Classroom research seemed like a promising possibility. Early in 1987, we decided to give it a try by sending an invitation briefly describing our intentions to the 100 Teaching Fellows still at URI. When all was said and done, some 20 faculty were signed up for a Classroom Research Program.

We had the faculty and we had a theme, but we didn't have much beyond that. Truth be told, we weren't altogether sure what classroom research was – that is, how it differed from our other activities – much less how we were going to encourage it. Fortunately, faculty came to the organizational meeting that spring with some ideas for the program. Indeed, a few had classroom research projects planned and about ready to conduct in the fall. Most of the others had questions that could be transformed into research projects. We agreed to meet roughly once a month during the 1987-88 academic year and to regard the fall semester as the time to plan classroom research projects which would then be carried out during the spring semester.

During the summer and throughout the fall semester, we met with faculty individually to plan their research projects. In addition, we held four seminar meetings organized around the following topics: (1) collect-

ing data about learning styles; (2) measuring stages of student development; (3) assessing student learning; (4) designs for research on classroom practice. Lest this seem an odd collection of topics around which to build a seminar on classroom research, keep in mind that these faculty were not new to the idea of viewing their classrooms as laboratories. All had participated in the Teaching Fellows Program, so they were accustomed to experimenting with different teaching practices and assessing the impacts on their students. Moreover, they were knowledgeable about the basic conditions for learning and the characteristics of students, including learning styles and stages of development. The topics for the seminar meetings reflected the questions faculty were interested in investigating. We also took time during each of the seminar meetings to hear reports on how individual research projects were shaping up and to offer suggestions on problems and issues as they emerged.

By January, those faculty who had conducted research projects during the fall had enough data to keep them busy for at least a semester. The remainder had outlined classroom research projects in sufficient detail to proceed. We continued to meet about once a month during the spring semester, using the meetings to keep one another informed about progress, to brainstorm solutions for unanticipated problems, to report findings as they came in, to begin speculating about what those data might mean, and to encourage the researchers to write up their projects to share with others.

About a dozen of our original twenty researchers continued to meet through the spring. Of those who dropped out, a couple had courses which did not fill, another two or three just could not seem to fit their data collection in until it was too late, and the rest lost interest or simply never managed to define testable questions to pursue. We asked the remainder to write about their research, using the following as general organizing questions: 1) What was the problem/question your research addressed and what was its significance to you? 2) What did you do to address your problem/question and how did you attempt to ascertain the effects of what you did or the answers to your question? 3) What did you find out? 4) How did or will what you did and found out affect your teaching practice? 5) What are some of your reflections on your "classroom research" experience? The papers in this collection are all of those completed by early June of this year.

We think that they are an interesting set of papers, quite representative of the range of classroom research questions which our group took on. When we invited faculty to participate in the program, we told them that we were "thinking about a program that would support your efforts to be creative and experimental, watchful and reflective, as you deal

with the day-to-day realities of teaching,” and we stressed that we were “not seeking to add pages to educational research journals or to conduct the sorts of studies found therein.” We wanted something different from traditional educational research and from the individual consultation that we already offered to faculty. We think we got that. In most cases, the emphasis upon questions that faculty were interested in investigating led us in different directions, involved us in collecting data we do not ordinarily collect, and stimulated conversations we do not normally have. Although these activities have not always been those most likely to lead to significant or urgently needed improvements in teaching or learning, the projects have been interesting, they’ve generated enthusiasm, and they’ve created a sense of suspense that brings people to meetings eager to hear what colleagues are finding. We were happy about that and look forward to another round this year.

## References

- Cross, K. P. (1986a, March). Taking teaching seriously. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for Higher Education, Washington, D. C.
- Cross, K. P. (1986b). The need for classroom research. In J. Kurfiss, L. Hilsen, L. Mortensen, & E. Wadsworth. (Eds.), *To improve the academy* (pp. 3-17). A Publication of the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education.

## Author Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1988 Annual Meeting of the American Association for Higher Education in Washington, D. C., as part of the POD Network sampler, *Reforming undergraduate teaching and learning: Views from the Trenches*.