

Title: Diffusion of Teaching Innovations in Higher Education:

An Action Research Project

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Research Objectives

The project was an attempt to provide an avenue for college professors to share and discover new approaches to teaching and classroom management and to solve issues and concerns arising in other teaching-related activities. The purpose was to provide a forum for faculty interaction across the disciplines, an opportunity not otherwise formally available to them. Faculty members often felt isolated in dealing with student and teaching-related issues. It was comforting, if not enlightening, to find out how other colleagues dealt with similar problems and issues. Thus, an opportunity to regularly share experiences, air concerns, or to ask for help and ideas from others to solve problems was seen as useful. Monthly informal faculty gatherings enabled the exchange of ideas and promoted diffusion of teaching innovations. This is an ongoing project. This paper presents the first two phases of the action research project: planning and action. The four stages of action research are: plan, act, observe, and reflect (McKernan, 1991). These four stages continue to be repeated until the problem is solved or the objective of the research is achieved. Although planning, action, and observation happen

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sequentially, reflection happens at all times during these stages. For example, typically after each session, the facilitators (“we” hereafter) reflected on the method of facilitation, reevaluating whether we needed a more structured format for the sessions presentation of special subjects by experts, etc.

The following sections of the paper describe the planning and action stages of the project. Specifically, addressed are how the project originated and why and the method used to collect and analyze data in order to identify issues critical to the faculty.

## Method

Kurt Lewin (1943, 1948) is credited with conceptualizing action research as a problem solving approach in social systems. His work on T-groups set the foundation for action research (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). However, Dewey’s approach to research, which refused to separate thought from action, gave legitimacy to action research as a way of knowing in education. Dewey (1927,1991) believed that the real sources of knowledge are found in action and that democracy, as an ongoing process, needed all levels of the society to participate.

We use the definition of action research by McKernan (1991) as it best defines our project. He defines action research as “...the reflective process whereby in a given problem area, where one wishes to improve practice or personal understanding, inquiry is carried out by the practitioner - first, to clearly define the problem; secondly, to specify a plan of action - including the test of hypotheses by application of action to the problem. Evaluation is then undertaken to monitor and establish the effectiveness of the action taken. Finally, participants reflect upon, explain developments, and communicate these

results to the community of action researchers. Action research is systematic self-reflective scientific inquiry by practitioners to improve practice” (McKernan, 1991, p. 5).

In the democratic tradition of action research, participation of the stakeholders in the research process is an essential element. The researcher too becomes a participant, leading and guiding the individuals and providing the methodological expertise. It is the local knowledge (that of the participants) that guides the directions and the decisions made by the group to identify and/or solve problems. The authors organized an informal discussion forum (Teaching Innovations Network or TIN) to provide faculty the opportunity to bring ideas and issues to discuss. The sessions were loosely structured and relaxed, with no set agendas, allowing the participants to bring up topics and issues related to teaching as they saw necessary. With this structure all the faculty participants felt heard and had an opportunity to contribute to whatever topic that was being discussed. Furthermore, no one felt pressured to prepare for these sessions. Discussions were impromptu. This was a place faculty came to sometimes to get away from their daily routines, to listen to others and to informally discuss things going on in their classrooms. We believed that the relaxed structure of the sessions contributed to keeping the faculty interest.

A group of interested faculty gathered over brown bag lunches to share stories, concerns, and ideas on teaching innovations. The informal structure of the sessions allowed discussion of topics and issues that were timely and of immediate concern to the faculty. Preplanned presentations were intentionally avoided although we had few topics on hand for discussion in case the group did not have immediate issues, topics or stories to discuss or share. Initially, the participants who showed up for these sessions varied

greatly. Over time, certain individuals showed up regularly. Other faculty joined the group occasionally. However, all departments of the university were represented at each meeting. A synopsis of the discussions was shared with all faculty members to keep them informed of the ongoing process to encourage a wider participation.

## Results and Discussion

Participants included faculty members from disciplines across the university: education, business, psychology, environmental science, and liberal studies. In the initial stages many issues were brought up: student discipline, building community and trust among students, advising, approaches to teaching, assessing student learning, use of technology in teaching, difficulty of teaching small classes, evaluation methods, program assessments, time management and workload issues. At one session the participants reflected on teaching and its rewards.

Diversity of the disciplines was reflected in the variations of assessment and evaluation methods used by faculty participants. Over time it became apparent that certain issues were of major concern to the regular participants. The topics that emerged of greater importance to them were: assessment, evaluation, student discipline, and teaching methods. After several discussions on these topics, the faculty members decided to participate in a study to explore effective learning evaluation methods.

After analyzing the responses and the discussion contents of the sessions it became apparent to us that the participants must be introduced to action research. None of the participants other than the two facilitators were familiar with action research. We provided readings on action research and lead discussions on the topic. Discussions followed and a main topic of interest to faculty emerged: effective learning evaluation

methods. The faculty members unanimously agreed to participate in a study of learning evaluation methods. They agreed that the best way to do this was to systematically collect data from their own evaluation of learning in the classroom and share it with the group. They would bring data from their course learning evaluations for analysis. It was agreed also that we, the facilitators, would provide guidelines for collection and analysis of data. This activity is planned for the semester of Fall 2002.

We sought feedback from the participants during and outside the sessions. The responses were positive; faculty found opportunity for camaraderie, and found the information sharing sessions enlightening and in some cases therapeutic. We, in many instances, were inspired to reflect on our teaching practices and went away with many new ideas for approaches to teaching and evaluation. In his book on curriculum as conversation, Applebee (1996) argues that knowledge-in-action, the heart of curriculum, arises out of participation in ongoing conversations about things that matter. Using this premise, we used “conversations” as a means to identify and deal with issues that mattered to us collectively.

As this action research project continues we plan to gain many strategies for improving knowledge campus-wide related to student learning assessment and evaluation techniques. This information will be shared and used to continue enhancing our knowledge about improved learning and teaching.

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