



Resource Review

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Review:

This is a rich and helpful guide to the reasons for, issues around and methods of conducting research into the quality of teaching and learning. It is a practitioner's guide and, as such, provides a wealth of easy to follow methods for conducting pedagogical research. The writing style exhorts the reader to practice pedagogical research and provides many ways for doing so. The friendly writing style also makes this a highly accessible read. The tone of the book mirrors the collegiate and collaborative messages within and you feel as if you have a knowledgeable and critical friend by your side, engaging you in the subject and inexorably drawing you to the conclusion that this (pedagogical research) is a good thing to be doing.

Given the vast number of variables at play in any given teaching environment; teaching approach, subject matter, prior student and teacher knowledge and experience, group dynamics, motivation to learn, motivation to teach, etc, it is unsurprising that the reasons for the output of teaching is sometimes unclear. This book presents different methods for starting to better understand the factors which have positive or negative effects on the teaching and learning experience. It puts forward a case for conducting pedagogical research on an ongoing basis, with

associated benefits, to both inform faculty staff and the wider teaching and learning community. The authors do accept, however, that pedagogical research may not always be welcomed, or even be seen as a priority. For example, the book puts forward the 'caveat' of '...resistance towards scholarship of teaching and learning at different levels...' and discusses possible causes (e.g. insufficient resources, sustaining research staffing levels.) These are useful considerations for anyone wanting to become involved in pedagogical research on a structured basis and will serve as a useful platform to explore the best approaches.

The book has five chapters which look at what pedagogical research is, how research can focus on teaching, how research can focus on learning, statistical analysis and pedagogical research as a resource to be shared within a scholarly community. From an academic viewpoint the book supports its assertions through frequent and relevant reference to related research. This will be useful when bringing its contents to the attention of colleagues and students to engender debate on the importance of research into teaching and learning.

When studying to become a teacher in the early 1980s, I was fascinated by the whole process of teaching and learning. We were provided with a wealth of principles and understanding of the psychological and pedagogical factors affecting the teaching and learning experience. However, this book made me realize that teaching excellence is enhanced by an ongoing study of (and utilizing lessons learned from) how well these principles are being applied and to what extent they assist the learning experience.

Chapter two outlines how the fact that academics are first and foremost subject specialists (as opposed to teaching specialists) can provide an initial hurdle to be overcome ('...most people complete graduate school with extensive knowledge of the content of their discipline and very little training in how to effectively teach others about that discipline, not to mention learning how to assess whether they are effective at teaching beyond the use of student evaluations.' (p.23)

Further; '...many make the assumption that you can teach what you know well, without learning how to teach.'" (p.23)

This chapter outlines various methods for teachers to clarify the purpose and process of their teaching. The authors also provide a wide range of instruments which may be used to analyse the teaching and learning experience. This will enable ongoing refinement of the teaching process through a better understanding of what works and

what doesn't. Here are three examples of the analytical tools presented in this chapter;

Teacher Behavior (sic) Checklist – which allows the teacher's approach to be compared with those of 'master teachers' (Buskist & Keeley, 2004.) This could be used to generate discussion around exemplary teaching methods and what is required of new faculty staff (for example).

Teaching Style Inventory – identifies teaching style (Grasha, 1996.) The book also directs readers to an online version (see: <http://www.iats.com/publications/TSI.shtml>) This would be very useful in helping faculties discuss which teaching styles are most suitable for teaching which subjects and at which stages of a programme of learning.

Teaching Goals Inventory (and Self-Scoring Worksheet) (Angelo & Cross, 1993) – this helps teachers identify what it is they wish to achieve and enables suitable assessment methods to be constructed. This would, for example, help faculties prioritise various student learning outcomes.

At the end of Chapter two there is also a very useful list of discipline-specific and general scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) journals. These journals would be useful in allowing teaching and learning staff to investigate what pedagogical research is being carried out in their discipline areas and how this research can answer some of the questions they may have. They may also wish to contribute the findings of their own pedagogical enquiries to these communities (which is something the authors describe as helping teachers achieve the highest level of teaching – Scholarship of Teaching and Learning). 'The academic community is changed when SoTL becomes a valued priority' (p.16) and 'pedagogical research in general and SoTL in particular can lead to new models of teaching and learning and in turn can create an environment in which discussion of teaching and learning is the norm and these exchanges can further improve the academy" (p.16).

Chapter three focuses on the learning experience. Whereas Chapter two looked at the qualities of the teaching process, this chapter explores what it means to investigate the student learning experience. The chapter describes factors affecting student learning (study habits, psychological processing, note taking, reading, response to assessment,) and how these may be investigated. It also discusses ethical considerations relating to the investigation of student learning. I found this chapter to be a useful discussion of what it means for a student to have had a great learning experience.

Chapter four discusses varying approaches to the analysis of data generated through pedagogical research. It outlines the differences between qualitative and quantitative research methods and why each may be relevant to the pedagogical researcher. The chapter explains how researchers need to seek statistical significance in order to sort which factors are most important; to paraphrase the chapter, 'what is this study telling me about how the teaching method or the learning response has influenced the effectiveness of the learning experience and can I make reliable assumptions from this data?' The chapter provides a useful overview (and perhaps a refresher for some – like me) of the process of choosing statistical analyses that match the research approach.

Chapter five explores the possible composition of teaching and learning centres of excellence within educational institutions and their role in the facilitation of pedagogical research and the dissemination of best practice. The chapter outlines many benefits to the setting up of such centres (for example teacher support: 'having a teaching and learning center is clear evidence that the institution values teaching and learning and assisting faculty with improving their teaching, and having this as a resource particularly for new faculty sends a signal that they are not alone when first starting out in the world of academics' (p.202). The chapter also provides principles of good practice for teaching and learning centres (Sorincelli, 2002.)

This book provides an excellent resource to explore the rationale and methods for conducting pedagogical research. As the focus upon accountability in education continues to increase, it will be useful for institutions to be able to point to the results of their own investigations into the effectiveness of the teaching and learning experience. Ongoing exploration of what it means to be an effective teacher and the teaching and learning approaches adopted will lead to a better understanding of the education experience itself. The sharing of the results of this research with peers in a collegial manner will also serve to enhance the teaching community as a whole. The authors have succeeded in providing a framework by which the research process can be achieved.

References

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