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# Improving Higher Education: Issues and Perspectives on Teaching and Learning\*

**Maryellen Weimer**

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*In this article the author identifies five lessons that have helped her better understand the work of instructional developers. She suggests that the lessons, based on her ten years in instructional development, have helped her prepare for the future challenges of instructional development. She encourages others to consider these lessons, reflect on the lessons learned from their own experiences, and act on what has been learned in order to confront the changing landscape in higher education.*

For the past ten years, I directed Penn State's Instructional Development Program, which supported and encouraged faculty efforts to maintain and improve instructional quality. Simply stated, it was a teacher improvement program, but we never described its function quite that explicitly. When I started the job, I was young, optimistic, enthusiastic, and naive. Now that I am not, I have been reflecting on those ten years and what my efforts to improve instruction have taught me and what they may signify about efforts occurring elsewhere with faculty. I am going to talk about five lessons I have learned not because they represent universal truth, but because I hope they will stimulate your own deeper reflection of how we should approach improvement tasks in the decade ahead.

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## To Faculty Belongs the Ultimate Instructional Prerogative

Let me begin with a lesson that I learned early on—to *faculty belongs the ultimate instructional prerogative*. In other words, I learned (what I should have known) you cannot improve others' teaching for them. I remember once going to a class where a teacher botched a whole variety of participation strategies. I could clearly see the mistakes and could see with equal clarity what needed to happen in their place. Constructively, and explicitly, I explained all this to the faculty member, and the next time I observed the class, he did not do anything differently. I remember feeling impotent, powerless, useless, but I learned something very important. Just as with students, there is a point where my responsibility ends and, as in this case, the other faculty member's begins.

But I learned something else in experiences like this, and that lesson involves the important role motivation plays in the improvement process. The need to affect teacher motivation raises a whole series of perplexing questions. What is the motivation to teach, and what personal and professional satisfactions does it offer? Are those rewards available across a career? What motivates faculty to teach better? The chance to win a teaching award? The possibility that students will learn more? Are those the reasons we hold out to them when we seek to involve them in improvement activities? What is the appropriate balance for teachers between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation—improving because they have to or because they want to?

I do not have answers to these questions, and I do not see much in the literature that addresses them. We are starting to write, think, and do research about faculty burnout, which I believe is what happens to faculty when they lose the motivation to teach but continue teaching anyway. Our journals are filled with rhetoric about the importance of institutional reward and recognition for teaching but still almost nothing that explores how those of us with improvement agendas must tap, direct, influence, and use motivation so that faculty will implement the alterations we propose.

## Instruction Can Be Improved

The second lesson I learned is a more hopeful and optimistic one: I learned that *instruction can be improved*. Some of that improvement, I believe, occurs naturally, the inevitable result of practice. However, effective improvement occurs if three things characterize those efforts to change: 1) systematic efforts to change; 2) careful application of research to practice;

and 3) involvement of others, most notably students and/or a colleague helper like an instructional or faculty developer. Let me briefly share some ideas about each of these supplements to the improvement process.

As I watch teachers trying to improve, all too often they remind me of children playing pin-the-tail on the donkey. Somebody has given them a tail that looks a lot like the latest new idea or hot technique: a collaborative learning strategy, the wimby pairs idea for teaching problem solving, group exams, journals, extra credit study groups. It is their turn; the faculty player has the tail in hand and proceeds with it to the next class period where it is blindly attached to the proceedings. There is no sense that it might belong in some classes better than others, or that it might suit some students better than others, some content better than others, and some teachers better than others. It is a good idea, and, by golly, it is going to get used in whatever happens to be taught tomorrow.

Efforts to improve need to be more systematic than a pin-the-tail on the donkey game. They need to be planned, organized, executed with forethought. I think the systematic approach begins with what I call instructional awareness—having a sense of who I am as a teacher and how I teach. It starts with mundane details. Where do I locate myself in the room? Do I use a podium, an overhead, the chalkboard, or some combination of them? Do I gesture? When, how often, with which hand, for what reason? The systematic approach continues with a perpetual analysis of the instructional policies, practices, and behaviors I use on student learning. For example, if I gave someone who did not know me a copy of my syllabus, after analyzing the document, what would she/he think I believed about students, about learning, about teaching, about my content? This approach ends with a thoughtful consideration of all new educational “donkey tails” in terms of my teaching style (how I teach), my content (what I teach), my students (who I teach), and my classroom (where I teach).

Efforts to improve are also more effective if they involve an application of research to practice. Basically, teachers need to be informed. We have no tradition of treating teaching as a content area, as a discipline with knowledge to be learned, transferred, and discovered. I am continually depressed by the fact that so many college professors teach uninformed of college teaching research.

They cannot bear the whole burden for this problem. If you have ever tried to read educational research, you, too, have discovered the problem: It is not easily decipherable to those of us on the outside, and it is not published in journals one finds on bedside tables. Not all of it is useful and relevant (We could say that of research in most fields, couldn't we?). However, I do

not believe that this justifies the uninformed practice of our profession. When efforts to improve occur independent of what we know about how students learn, independent of what we know are the ingredients of effective instruction, independent of what we know about test anxiety (to name three of many, many areas in which relevant research exists), those efforts are not as effective.

Here I must stress the point I most wish to avoid. We, my friends, tend to be equally unmindful of the role research can and should play in our practice. Let me substantiate that judgment. A couple of summers ago, a colleague and I were preparing a review of research articles on instructional interventions, looking particularly at research evidence on the effectiveness of various strategies in changing teaching behaviors. Judith Levinson-Rose and Bob Menges did the same thing in 1981, so we decided to update their review. Like them, we found that workshops, seminars, and programs continue to be the main staple in the instructional improver's cupboard. They wrote, "workshops and seminars are probably the most frequent but least evaluated instructional improvement activities" (p. 406).

Since 1981, the literature on the workshop intervention has grown dramatically. Workshops proliferate. They vary in length, in the topics they present, in the instructional methods used, and in the audiences they target.

And how do we ascertain the effectiveness of these programs? In the main, we ask faculty if they like them. But, as several researchers cited in our review point out, this is the least significant way to measure the effectiveness of workshops. We can and should be proud of the fact that, in general, faculty do like the programs we provide. They find them useful, informative, and relevant. However, evidence like this falls far short of proving that these programs have helped faculty change their instructional behaviors, nor do these data establish any relationship between program participation and significantly improved learning outcomes for students. We concluded in our review, a "discussion of this intervention cannot be concluded without considerable concern . . . expressed about the extensive use of a method to improve instruction with so little corroboration of its effectiveness" (Weimer & Lenze, 1991, p. 305).

What is the solution? How do we bring research to bear on practice? First, I would say those of us at the forefront of instructional improvement efforts must value it, respect it, use it, and do it. Yes, we are, for the most part, practitioners. Most of us have neither the training nor the interest necessary to do educational research. And I am not proposing an exclusive reliance on quantitative empirical inquiry, although more of that is needed in the case of workshops. A great deal of interest has been generated by the

Carnegie report *Scholarship Reconsidered* (Boyer, 1990) with its long overdue call for new, broader, and more inclusive definitions of research. Most of our activities fall within the proposed definitions of scholarship. We need to promote our work, to publish and present it, to treat the improvement of instruction as a content area with knowledge to be learned, transferred, and discovered. The wisdom of practice has taught us much and could do much to inform the more systematic quantitative and qualitative research efforts this field so very much needs.

Building the bridge between research and practice is crucial to the improvement of instruction but so is the involvement of others in the process. The point here is not profound. Teaching requires a large self-investment and with that comes a certain blindness that by necessity protects the investment. I once worked with a faculty member who was clearly interested in having his teaching videotaped, but he resisted for months, announcing he would, scheduling, and then canceling the event. Finally, I cornered him, looked him straight in the eye, and said, "Fred, what gives?" His face flushed, he broke eye contact, clenched his hands, and mumbled the truth: "I'm afraid I'll find out I look like a fool, and I've been teaching this way for 20 years." I knew him well enough that I could hug him and knew his teaching well enough to assure him that the fear was groundless. If I had not been there to support and assure, I wonder if he ever would have had his teaching taped.

The involvement of others makes two contributions to the improvement effort. First, it helps us overcome the inherent difficulty of seeing our own teaching objectively, of seeing it as it really is. The input of colleagues and students allows us to correct, elaborate, and refine our instructional self-images. Second, the involvement of others generally infuses the process with new ideas, alternative strategies, and approaches. They have ideas we have not thought of, viewpoints we have never heard of, techniques we have never seen before. That is not to say all the input from colleagues, the expert opinions of improvement professionals, to say nothing of the comments from students, is valuable, but it is the infusion itself that benefits the improvement process. It makes us think, respond, and ultimately have a clearer vision of what we do and why we do it. So, instruction can be improved, and often improvement is accomplished via techniques, tips, and instructional tricks.

## **Instructional Tips, Tricks, and Techniques Bless and Curse Improvement**

The third lesson I've learned: I have come to see that these *instructional tips, tricks, and techniques both bless and curse the improvement process.*

There is no doubt that much college teaching suffers from a lack of technique, and most college faculty teach from a limited repertoire of instructional strategies. We are back to another consequence of the lack of instructional training both before and during our careers. So, to infuse teaching with a variety of new techniques has a quick and obvious payoff with sometimes dramatic results. Moreover, much of what we propose is often easy to implement, like longer wait time after questions, skeletal outlines to reveal content structure, and less material on each overhead. Sometimes I am almost embarrassed by the simple-minded suggestions I must make to faculty.

These are the blessings—the things that attract us to techniques. But they are not unmixed blessings. And I am worried that the blessings sometimes blind us to the curse. Relying on techniques oversimplifies the improvement process and ends up devaluing teaching. Let me explain how I think this works. Teaching is a highly complex, idiosyncratic, dynamic process. To convey the impression that it is nothing more than a bag of tricks, that getting students involved in a class is no more than knowing 22 participation strategies, belies the inherent complexity of the teaching phenomenon. The idea is easy to demonstrate. I have watched too many faculty in participation workshops waiting to find out the techniques. I have seen them make lists, move out to the class, smile, restate the question, break the question down, ask a different kind of question, etc., and I have seen those smiles of smug satisfaction. They leave thinking they have it. They are covered. They know 22 participation strategies. But techniques are to teaching the same as they are to playing the piano. If you want to make music, you must have them, but you can have all the techniques in the world and never make music or, in this case, get students involved in class.

That transpires something like this. The day after the workshop on participation, the faculty member decides to implement some new ideas in class. She tries one. It does not work. Now in a period of time that does not allow for scholarly reflection and analysis, a second technique must be selected. How does she do that? Pull out the list and analyze the techniques? No, she does not have time. And once that second technique has been selected and used, she is committed to whatever course of action it implies. She cannot go back, erase that technique and try another. If what she has done has confused students further, she must live and deal with the consequences. Add to this live performance dimension of teaching the variable effects of any technique. Some days a particular sequence of techniques works brilliantly, another day, another class, another professor, and another decidedly different set of results. It is mind boggling and makes any moments of success in class truly remarkable accomplishments.

So, to improve instruction by technique alone is to over simplify and underestimate the complexity of teaching and the process of improving it. And when we oversimplify, we devalue.

To put it tactfully, we may be part of the problem, rather than the solution. We all know that teaching is not recognized and rewarded as it ought to be. We agonize, pontificate, plead, and show passion about that. We know that it is more than the issue of money. It is a question of value, of seeing teaching as being something other than a second-class citizen, a weaker sibling to research. It is the recognition that teaching done well requires effort, that for most, it is no miracle, no gift, but the consummation of dedicated determination, of wrestling with difficulties, of agonizing rounds of trial and error. At its best it is like research at its best: the culmination of concerted effort sprinkled with moments of inspiration and sheer artistry. To see teaching only as techniques, tricks, and tips devalues. It narrows, bounds, and constrains unnecessarily the broad vision of the phenomenon necessary if we are to understand truly the process of improving it.

## **Instructional Improvement is a Difficult Process**

The next lesson I have learned is closely connected to the issues of technique in the instructional improvement process: *instructional improvement is a difficult process*. It requires determination, concerted effort, and hard work. And, it is not well understood. Some would beg to disagree, but as a practitioner faced with a faculty member who needs to improve, let me identify the questions for which I am still looking for answers. Let's say an anonymous faculty member has a number of teaching problems. He (it could be a she) lectures. There is no student participation or involvement in class. His board work is sloppy, illegible, not well organized. His examples are dated. He speaks fondly of Ike, does not think anybody has really made a movie since Bogie. He tests infrequently, misses office hours regularly, thinks student evaluations are a crock. I said he was anonymous, but I will bet I could find him at your institution. Let us say he comes to you and admits things are not going well. He would like your advice on how he might teach more effectively. What do you say? Which of the problems mentioned should he tackle first? Does it matter? I think it does, but I do not know that for a fact. If he tries something and fails, how does that failure affect his commitment to try something else?

Let's imagine that he has had some sort of conversion experience. Maybe the division chair sent him to a conference on teaching; more likely the chair told him he was not going to get a raise until he did something about his student evaluations. Whatever precipitated the conversion, he wants to



change. Realistically, how many changes should be implemented at one time? Does it matter? Again, I think it does, but I do not know that for a fact. Significant behavior change seems to be difficult to sustain over time. Should I try to slow him down? Should I recommend fewer changes? How many?

Now let us say he proposes something I do not think will work, like trying to tell at least one joke every day. Why do I think it will not work? Well, he seems like a humorless fellow. He has never told jokes in class before. He does not smile very often. I do not think it fits his style. How do I know that? I do not know it for sure.

In case you have not guessed, I am talking about a forever anonymous real case. I spent several days in my office thinking about how I was going to tell this person I did not like his idea of using jokes. I wanted to be constructive. I was also hoping some really rational justification would come to me. Before it did, he called on the phone and said the jokes were really working out well. I groaned to myself and visited his class the next day. The joke came sort of abruptly, in the middle of the period, and is a bit dated now. My colleague's spouse asked him, "Do you think we should have vegetables tonight?" "No," my colleague answered, "We had the Reagans last week." There were some audible groans but lots of grins. People sighed. Someone raised a hand and asked a question about content, which the instructor answered. It was not brilliant instruction, but it worked. Now who would have guessed that? So I have no answer to the question: How do I figure out what works for what instructor, teaching what content, to what students?

Returning to the scenario, let us change the story so that I was right about the joke telling. It did not work; students giggled—not because the joke was funny but because they felt uncomfortable and could not figure out what in the world happened to this guy. How long should a new technique be tried before it is abandoned? Two days? Two weeks? Once? Does it matter? I think so, but I do not know that for a fact. Sometimes the first time through is uncomfortable; it makes teacher and students nervous, but the second time through is better, and by the third time it is getting good. Sometimes the first five iterations do not work, but the sixth try produces awesome results.

My scenario is a microcosm. It is a set of questions relevant to an individual faculty member at a given point in time. Think about the improvement process across an entire career. Most of us know we were not very good when we began. But when do our talents peak (maybe plateau is a better term)? Sometimes they decline, for all of us, but certainly more precipitously for some than others. Why? Under what conditions? Some of us stop the decline, reclaim the lost ground, and climb to an even higher place. But some of us do not. Why? These are huge questions with no easy, concrete answers,

but the questions themselves make my point. The process of improving instruction is difficult, and it is not well understood.

## **Faculty Want to Improve**

I have another lesson to share, perhaps the most surprising and optimistic lesson I have learned as an instructional developer: I believe *faculty want to improve*. Yes, you heard me correctly. They want to improve, but their desire is more covert than overt. If you ask a typical “old” faculty member, “Would you like to improve your teaching?” he or she will not answer, “Yes.” Rather, the response will be either defensive: “Why do you ask? Did somebody tell you I needed to improve?” Or, it will be critical: “Why should I? Nobody cares about good teaching at this place.”

But ask faculty two other questions, and their answers will confirm my premise that they do, in fact, want to improve. Ask any faculty member, “Do you want to teach badly?” and the answer is an emphatic, “No!” In fact, the question makes people angry because it is such a stupid one. Why? What makes it a stupid question? It is stupid because we have all experienced bad days in class, and we know the special kind of hell they can be. It is probably the old Freudian pleasure/pain principle, but I submit it is a place to start. If we define improvement as doing what needs to be done to make those bad days infrequent realities, faculty members, even very ineffective ones, are attentive.

The second question is more positive, and its answer signifies at least a tacit endorsement of the improvement agenda: “Are you interested in how much and how well students learn your content?” No faculty person that I have encountered answers that question with anything but a resounding, “Yes!” Of course we care about student learning; that is what teaching is all about. Now, as soon as we begin to talk about how students learn, we are discussing knowledge with large instructional implications. We are talking about teaching, how, in fact, it needs to be changed. I know that these questions are back doors to better teaching, but those doors lead to the inside of the house just as surely as do the front doors. However, like you, I prefer entering from the front.

Let me end by offering the first lesson I learned as a faculty developer. It is inextricably linked to this issue of faculty motivation, although not all the links are clear in my own thinking. Perhaps we can sort them out together.

As I tried to forward the improvement agenda at my institution, I quickly learned that *what you call it DOES matter*. I had argued with the administrator who created both the name and description of my unit. We were interested in improving instruction, so why didn’t we come clean and admit it? Faculty

could see through the euphemism “development.” Couldn’t we just be an instructional improvement program? He did not think so, and I soon discovered why.

Inherent in notions of improvement are notions of deficiency. We improve something because it somehow is not good enough. We are talking about connotations, not denotations. According to Webster, when we improve, we raise the value or quality of something. So Zubin Mehta can improve his conducting skills, Jack Nicholas his long drives, Jamie Wyeth his use of earth tones, Alice Walker her narratives, but who would imagine that any of these skills are somehow deficient?

However, what the dictionary claims and what people feel a word implies do not always agree, and I learned that truth when I offered a workshop called “Improving Lectures”—and virtually nobody showed up. Institutional efforts to improve instruction cannot model themselves on programs like Alcoholics Anonymous where participants must admit they have a problem before they can get help. And we know that. Look at what we call our improvement efforts: “teaching excellence centers,” “faculty offices of instructional effectiveness or excellence,” and “teaching quality committees.” I would venture to guess that we do not have an instructional improvement program anywhere in this country or Canada.

What eludes me is a clear sense of where the line is between an honest portrayal of what we are trying to do and the need to motivate faculty participation. I would like for us to be able to say the “improve” word to teachers and have them understand that all faculty can improve and that most should. Given the fact that so many of us teaching at the postsecondary level are doing so without any formal preparation, I do not see why the fact that we need to improve should come as such a great shock. Moreover, if we understood that instructional improvements can result in greater learning for students and fewer bad days in class, it seems to me we ought to be openly interested in improving.

But I have learned the hard way. I enter through the back door and worry about all that implies for our profession. I hope that in the decade ahead we can endorse that mission with pride and purpose.

I have mentioned before an artist I first read about in the writings of Neal Whitman who had submitted a painting to a juried show. The artist won the “best-of-show” ribbon and was being honored at a reception. One patron effusively praised the painting and was surprised when the artist quietly commented, “But this isn’t my best painting.” The patron asked the obvious questions. “What do you mean it isn’t your best painting? Why, for heaven sakes didn’t you submit your best work?” “Well,” replied the artist, “the fact

of the matter is I haven't painted it yet." I like to think I have not done my best teaching yet, nor have the teachers I work with, nor has my institution offered its best undergraduate education yet, nor has our profession discovered the best way to better teaching and learning. To me, that is a very sanguine perspective we can take as we continue our efforts to improve teaching and learning in the years ahead.

## Conclusion

My decade in instructional development taught me a great deal. I would encourage you to reflect on and discuss the lessons your experiences have taught you, the lessons we may still need to learn. And most importantly, I would encourage us all to act on what we have learned as we confront the changing landscape in higher education. Our work is very important, and we sometimes underestimate its value. Robert Hahn wrote in the September/October 1990 issue of *Change*, "let us adopt without apology the language of sermon and parable, of hope and faith, if it helps sustain our belief in the better world to which all engaged teaching aspires" (p. 49).

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