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Eye on teaching: improving practice through research inquiries

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Abstract

Researching to improve teaching is a rare practice in the University of Malaya (UM). The faculties are more devoted to research in their own disciplines as the reward for publication and recognition on the research findings are more tangible and measurable. As a research university, UM recognizes the importance of action research to improve practice among the lecturers. This presentation will share our journey to introduce scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) to the faculties and our effort to guide faculties to systematically create knowledge about their practice by having their “Eye on Teaching.” The journey began in the year 2008 when we invited the first national teaching award winners to share their experience. The meeting launched our mission to improve practice among the lecturers by forming the first action research group consisting of participants from several higher education institutions in Malaysia. Learning from the first action research group we have now formed two more research groups focusing on different aspects of research on their teaching. It is our hope that the lessons learnt from our experience will benefit other staff developers who are interested in enhancing the scholarship of teaching and learning in their institutions.

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1. Introduction

The introduction of the National Teaching Award 2006 by the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia shows that the ministry is concerned about good teaching and is willing to recognize excellent teachers or lecturers. “What is good teaching?” and “What criteria do we use to recognize good teaching?” These are two questions that prompted the Academic Development Center (ADeC) to respond. In June 2008 ADeC organised the ‘Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Seminar’ attended by academicians from several Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The first national winners of teaching and teaching innovation awards were invited to reflect on their journey to win the awards and to share their experience. It was from this seminar that academicians were made aware that researching into one’s teaching practice (through action research) can lead to innovations in teaching and learning and that this element is an important criterion used in the national teaching award.

As a result of the seminar, a pilot Action Research (AR) group with members from the University of Malaya (UM) and two private higher education institutions was formed. The group was guided in their inquiry into researching their practice to improve their teaching. This culminated in their final output of paper presentations shared in the ‘Eyes on Teaching’ seminar organised by ADeC in November 2009.

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Action research was chosen as a method to find ways to improve our practice through reflection thus creating new knowledge. The knowledge created is knowledge of practice (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). The various activities and processes associated with reflective practice have been devised to help us gain greater awareness and understanding of our ‘selves’ as professional tools (Stierer, 2008).

The growing concern on AR is shared across the globe simply due to the fact that action research is a powerful professional development tool that enables

- Educators to work best on problems they have identified for themselves.
- Educators to become more effective when encouraged to examine and assess their own work and then consider ways of working innovatively and differently.
- Educators to help each other by working collaboratively.

The University of Malaya through ADeC was among the first Malaysian higher education institutions (HEI) to initiate an action research group. This AR project is aimed to develop an Action Research Group model to be followed by other institutions in Malaysia. This model draws together faculty members whose scholarly interests include teaching and learning but who may not find sufficient group of colleagues for this work within their academic departments or professional schools (Shulman, 2004). In line with the Ministry of Higher Education’s agenda, it is hoped that each HEI in Malaysia will form an individual AR group that will eventually collaborate with other HEIs AR groups hence forming the Malaysian Action Research community as in New Zealand called the “TERNZ”.

This paper will share the experience of ADeC to introduce scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) to the faculties and our effort to guide faculties to systematically create knowledge about their practice by having their “Eye on Teaching.” This is an attempt to help capable researchers become excellent at both research and teaching. The paper will first describe the journey to set up the three action research groups to be followed by a presentation of the challenges and issues faced by the groups, and finally offer suggestions for those who are interested in setting up similar AR groups in their universities.

2. UM action research

Since 2009, three AR groups were established under ADeC with the aims to

- Facilitate the conduct of action research (AR) to improve practice among the lecturers
- Indirectly assess the effectiveness of ADeC’s training programmes
- Embed academic writing skills amongst UM academicians in areas beyond their professional disciplines and
- Drive tangible output from actual practice in the forms of journal papers, seminars and conferences.

As in any research activities, AR involves data collection, with the lecturer being the researcher and instrument, while their students being the sample. The output of the research will in turn initiate series of actions for further improvement in future teaching and learning activities, hence enhancing the teaching quality through the practice of SoTL.

University of Malaya Action Research (UMAR) group members are selected from among those who have attended ADeC’s training programmes or seminars, such as Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), Qualitative Research Series, Teaching and Learning and Assessment Series. A brief description of each UMAR group follows.

2.1. UMARI

The first or our pilot UMAR group was established in year 2008 after the first SoTL workshop attended by participants from several HEIs in Malaysia. Members were invited from among the participants. The initial number was 15 represented by 7 HEIs (UM, UiTM, UPM, UTAR, INTIUC, KDU, Taylor’s U). However, attrition rate was

quite high, ending in 5 final members, who went ahead and completed their AR and presented their research at the first Eye on Teaching Seminar in 2009.

2.2. *UMAR2*

Learning from *UMAR1*, the second group was initiated. Members were invited based on their attendance at ADeC's training programmes on qualitative research methods and related trainings on teaching and learning and assessment. Eleven participants from different disciplines joined the group. The group decided to work on examining their teaching practice through the use of Start, Stop and Continue method. The participants worked with their students getting feedback on their practice on what they need to start doing, stop doing and continue doing in their teaching and supporting student learning. The group is now preparing to share their research at an upcoming seminar on November 2010. They are also writing their report for publication in journals and book chapters.

2.3. *UMAR3*

The third *UMAR* was started in early 2010. The focus of the group is on assessment practice. Members were invited from three higher education institutions (UM, UiTM, USIM). The group consists of 16 lecturers from different disciplines. It is hoped that the group will be able to share their research in a seminar scheduled in December 2010. The group is also preparing papers for publications.

3. Challenges

The journey to keep the "Eye on Teaching" has been a challenge to both the initiator (ADeC) and individuals involved. As a research university, the focus on teaching as a rewarding route still has a long way to go. The motivation for the faculties to pursue SoTL is still low. More efforts are needed to develop the SoTL culture and to convince both the management and the individuals of the needs for professional development in teaching and learning. The general challenges faced by the AR groups include:

- a. The AR leadership both at the individual and institutional levels. Very few individuals are engaged in SoTL research locally. Therefore, finding someone who can walk the talk was a difficult task, we had to seek help from overseas.
- b. The role of the facilitator. Because of the scarcity of talent who can lead and facilitate the group, it was difficult to find someone who is able to coach, mentor, drive and teach the AR groups.
- c. Group members' expectation and commitment. As members are new to AR they expected ADeC to be holding their hands and make decisions for the group.
- d. ADeC on the other hand expected the groups to be independent, self-directed. Faculties are expected to carry out independent inquiry and take on the ownership of the group. ADeC's role is to provide a platform to support the group, with minimum administrative duty and at minimum financial expense.
- e. Because of limited resources, managing the AR groups became a challenge for ADeC – Much time was wasted in coordinating the groups' timetable for meetings and discussions and dealing with other logistics, such as calling for meetings, keeping minutes of the meetings and reporting to the group. The task required ADeC to appoint a special officer to manage the AR groups when it is expected that the group would be self-managed.
- f. ADeC had to request for a special budget from the management to conduct the programmes.
- g. Venue to hold meetings was a challenge as ADeC does not have a proper meeting room. Therefore, coordinating the meeting was a daunting experience.

Beside the general challenges faced by ADeC, the individuals in the AR groups had to deal with their own problems of transforming from a disciplined based researcher to becoming AR researcher. It was a prerequisite that the group members would have prior knowledge on qualitative research methods. However, many of the group members were not ready for the independent inquiry typical of AR thus needed much help from the facilitators to develop the AR skills. Some of these problems are related to their lack of understanding of AR, thus affecting their ability to manage AR data and its analysis. The other significant issue that the group had to deal with is their ability to write in AR language, something that is not familiar to most members. The task of writing even a short abstract for the seminar became a big challenge for the group especially for those who are from the sciences.

Even though faced with many challenges, the journey to 'Eye on Teaching' is a good experience which we can find lessons to be shared with other higher education institutions who would be interested in supporting similar community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1998). A testimony from an UMAR member shows that the project is worth pursuing.

"I would like to say that it was a good and enlightening experience in knowing everyone especially Prof XX who is really positive and enthusiastic in teaching us action research and getting to know others especially H, Y, and Z thank you for all the good discussions and sharing of experience that we have... I really cherish the friendship that we have built." (e-mail from ZZ).

4. Lessons learnt

Some of the lessons learnt are:

- a. ADeC as a service centre that supports faculty professional development needs to further clarify her roles in UMAR.
- b. It is important to draw the terms of reference and commitment letter to be signed by the individual member so that expectations are met and commitment is serious.
- c. UMAR team members have to help define their roles and responsibilities as members. Members need to be reminded that AR is a project which they need to manage as a team just like the problem based learning that they give to their students. Therefore, members are expected to be self-directed, to fight their own battle and manage their learning.
- d. ADeC has to set boundaries which would free ADeC from taking on the responsibility of micro managing the group and providing them with everything they needed to complete the AR project.
- e. UMAR project needs support from the university management – Currently the management recognizes the work of UMAR, however, there is a need to draw a policy linking the work with key performance indicators (KPI) thus, rewarding faculties who engage in research to improve teaching and learning.
- f. To support UMAR effectively will require extra resources in terms of funding, manpower and space.

5. Conclusion

Our UMAR model is yet to be perfected. What we have shared is our experience of coordinating three groups of AR teams with different research focus. Our approach is to set the criteria for selection of members, and set a schedule for members to follow with meetings face to face facilitated by an experienced AR researcher. Unanticipated challenges surprised us and we have learnt to deal with them. We are looking at other models for campus support of the SoTL (Shulman, 2004) that other institutions may have implemented so that we can learn from their best practices. In order to sustain UMAR we hope to convince the management to recognize SoTL research as a legitimate pursuit of improving teaching and learning excellence in higher education, and to set aside grants for such research. According to Fukami (2004) appropriate infrastructure and culture is requisite within the institution to ensure healthy growth of SoTL.

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