SCI 398

Practical, Effective Professional Development for University Instructors

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Enrolment at Canadian universities has reached an all time high (Statistics Canada, 2004). Each year, more and more students pursue higher education in an effort to enhance their intellectual prowess and employability. Moreover, rising tuition fees has resulted in students paying more annually for their education (Statistics Canada, 2004). But are students getting their money’s worth?

While tuition continues to rise, there is little evidence to suggest that educational quality, or more specifically, teaching quality has improved (Gibbs, 1995). In fact, anecdotal evidence indicates that many professors view themselves primarily as researchers, teaching only out of obligation (Clifton & Rubenstein, 2002). Teaching is considered an inconvenience, diverting time and energy away from what is most important; research. Unfortunately, universities have done little to eliminate this frame of mind, and may even be encouraging it. Despite the fact that teaching ability is among the factors universities claim to consider for appointment and promotion, research indicates that as few as 12% of promotion decisions are based on teaching excellence (Gibbs, 1995). In general, tenure is reserved for individuals that demonstrate excellence in research, not teaching ability (Young, 2006). Young (2006) suggests that the differential status assigned to teaching and research may be attributed to differences in funding. Funding for teaching is not subject to the rigorous and competitive process of evaluation that is associated with research funding, giving the impression that teaching is less valuable (Young, 2006).

Another reason for this dichotomy may be that research is more easily evaluated than teaching (Young, 2006). Research is a public matter which can be evaluated based on ones ability to obtain grants and withstand thorough peer review in order to achieve publication, while teaching is a more private matter, offering fewer methods of evaluation (Young, 2006). Regardless of the reason, it is clear that, despite assertions of being committed to offering high-quality education, teaching ability is highly undervalued by our universities.

Fortunately, recent student demands for more effective teaching has brought this issue to the forefront, forcing universities to focus more attention on improving teaching quality (Clifton & Rubenstein, 2002; Bartlett, 2007). Universities are now faced with the question of how to meet...
this demand. The purpose of this paper is to examine the attributes that contribute to effective university teaching and discuss practical ways in which professors can improve the quality of their teaching. Furthermore, this paper will address some of the barriers that inhibit the development of high-quality university instructors and how these barriers can be overcome in order to improve teaching in our universities.

What Constitutes Effective Teaching?

In order to discuss ways in which university instructors can improve their teaching, it is first necessary to describe what exactly constitutes effective teaching. Many universities have established guidelines to assess the teaching ability of their faculty. Thus, one way to describe effective teaching is in terms of how universities gauge teaching proficiency. As one of Canada’s largest research universities, instructing over 60,000 students annually, the University of Toronto is comparable to other Canadian universities and many of the esteemed private universities in the United States, such as Harvard and Yale (Bartlett, 2007; Dr. John Percy, personal communication, March 2007). As such, for the purpose of this paper, the standards of teaching competency set up by the University of Toronto are considered to be representative of most universities both nationally and internationally.

The University of Toronto has divided teaching ability into two categories; teaching competence and teaching excellence (The Governing Council, 2003). According to the guidelines established by the Governing Council (2003), each faculty member must satisfy the standards of teaching competence in order to qualify for promotion or tenure. Teaching competence is described as an ability to stimulate and challenge students’ intellectual development and sense of inquiry (The Governing Council, 2003). Furthermore, teaching competence is evaluated based on an instructor’s success in developing students’ mastery of a subject (The Governing Council, 2003). In addition to satisfying the criteria for teaching competence, an evaluation of excellence in teaching requires a demonstration of exceptional teaching ability, with emphasis on one’s overall contribution to the teaching profession including, pedagogical reform and the development of innovative teaching methods, technology, textbooks,
and courses (The Governing Council, 2003). The above criteria are evaluated using multiple sources of data including teaching portfolios, student and peer evaluations and course enrolment data (The Governing Council, 2003).

Now that effective teaching has been defined using university standards, we can begin to examine the attributes and skills that enable an instructor to meet these requirements. Not surprisingly, research indicates that in order to teach effectively, an instructor must possess strong communication skills (Hativa, 2000). In other words, the instructor must speak clearly, provide straight-forward explanations and present the material in a logical and well-organized fashion (Clark, 1995; Hativa, 2000). The instructor must also possess a strong understanding of the subject in order to effectively organize the material and facilitate the students’ ability to make connections between novel information and previous experience and knowledge (Tiberius & Tipping, 1990; Clark, 1995). Effective teaching is also dependent on the instructor’s ability to stimulate student interest and curiosity in the subject matter. This is best accomplished by demonstrating enthusiasm for the subject and relating the material to real-life situations. Anyone who has attended university can attest to the fact that a subdued professor can make even the most exciting subject uninteresting, while an enthusiastic and motivating professor can make a dull subject stimulating. Thus, by expressing enthusiasm for the subject the instructor is more apt to capture the students’ interest and increase student attention during lectures, thereby enhancing comprehension. Effective instructors are also able to modify their teaching strategies to adapt to new technologies, changing student demographics and fluctuating class sizes, in order to adequately meet the needs of their students (Clark, 1995).

Availability and approachability are also key factors in determining one’s success as an instructor. It is important that an instructor be easily accessible to his or her students, either by staying after class to discuss student concerns, offering office hours, or by providing an e-mail address with which he or she can be reached. This helps students feel important and lets them know that help is available should they need it. In addition to accessibility, research shows that teaching effectiveness is significantly correlated with amicability (Sherman & Blackburn, 1975). If
students perceive the instructor as friendly and approachable, they are more apt to feel comfortable asking questions and discussing difficulties during class or during private consultation. Thus, both availability and approachability help to foster a good rapport between student and instructor, ultimately resulting in more effective teaching and enhanced student interest and understanding.

While good communication skills, enthusiasm, approachability and accessibility all contribute to an instructor’s success in the classroom, they are not sufficient conditions for effective teaching. Perhaps the most important factor in determining whether or not an individual is an effective instructor, is his or her view of teaching. Professors that have a positive view of teaching are more likely to be concerned about their ability to perform well as an instructor and are thus, more likely to seek help to improve the quality of their teaching. On the other hand, professors with a negative view of teaching may be less concerned about the quality of instruction they are offering their students and thus, less apt to consult their peers or campus resources in an effort to improve their instructional skills. In other words, professors that enjoy teaching and hold positive views about teaching may be more likely to put in the effort that is required to develop effective instructional skills.

In addition to having a positive view of teaching, research clearly shows that having a positive attitude towards students, as well as possessing an adequate amount of pedagogical knowledge, greatly enhance an instructor’s success in the classroom (Hativa, 2000). Hativa (2000) conducted a case study which examined two law professors who were very poorly rated by their students. Using multiple sources of data including student and instructor interviews, questionnaires and naturalistic observation, Hativa (2000) determined that the principle reasons for ineffective teaching were lack of pedagogical knowledge and negative beliefs about students. Both professors possessed minimal pedagogical knowledge, leading them to believe that lecturing was the best and only method of instruction for large classes, also causing them to focus more on content than delivery (Hativa, 2000). Furthermore, each professor held very negative views about their students, seeing them as lazy, inattentive and lacking in motivation.
Both professors received extensive instruction on pedagogy and training to increase their awareness of their negative beliefs and the damaging effects they may have on their teaching (Hativa, 2000). After this intervention, both professors observed a significant increase in student satisfaction (Hativa, 2000). Furthermore, when instruction improved, both professors indicated that their students were more prepared for class and more attentive during lecture (Hativa, 2000).

Increased pedagogical knowledge likely enhanced the professors’ teaching abilities because it provided them with insight into how learning occurs and thus allowed them to present the material using more effective strategies, specifically designed to enhance student understanding and interest. Increasing the professors’ awareness of their negative feelings may have allowed them to suppress or eliminate these harmful beliefs, thus decreasing animosity between the instructor and the students and enhancing the quality of the student-teacher relationship. Thus, having a sufficient amount of pedagogical knowledge and a positive opinion of students helps to increase instructional effectiveness and student satisfaction.

In sum, good communication skills, an ability to maintain student interest and approachability, combined with significant pedagogical knowledge and positive beliefs about students and teaching greatly enhance an instructor’s overall effectiveness in the classroom.

**Practical Ways to Improve the Quality of Instruction in Universities**

1) **Provide Teacher Training to Graduate Students**

   Elementary and secondary school teachers are required to complete one year of teachers college in order to begin teaching however, the majority of university professors receive little, if any, teacher training prior to beginning their careers (Rosensitio, 1999). Currently, most graduate programs offer little or no teacher training and thus, do not adequately prepare students for their role as instructors (Rosensitio, 1999; Buskist & Irons, 2006). Graduate school is primarily designed to enhance scholarship and research abilities, not promote the development of effective teachers (Rosensitio, 1999). As a result, many professors lack the pedagogical expertise essential for successful communication of knowledge and effective instruction.
Consequently, one way to improve the quality of university instruction is to increase the amount of teacher preparation students receive while completing their graduate studies.

A recent survey conducted by the Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium revealed that only half of the 1,900 University of Toronto graduate students surveyed, reported receiving teacher training during their graduate studies (Bloch-Nevitte, 2002). Furthermore, nearly half of those students who did receive training reported being unsatisfied with the preparation they did receive (Bloch-Nevitte, 2002). Another study conducted by Rosensitto (1999) surveyed 800 professors from various academic disciplines and discovered that the majority of them (81.6%) believe that graduate programs should include formal instruction on pedagogy and methodology in order to properly prepare students to teach. Moreover, many job opportunities opening at academic institutions require applicants to have an ample amount of teacher training and experience, which our current graduates are not receiving (Buskist & Irons, 2006). Thus, the above findings clearly indicate a demand for graduate programs to include teacher training and more opportunities to gain hands-on teaching experience.

One argument against offering courses in teaching pedagogy and methodology is that not all graduate students become professors. While this is true, one must also acknowledge the fact that many of them do, and presently, these students are ill prepared for the demands of teaching. Thus, while teacher training may be unnecessary for students who do not chose to teach, not providing teacher training can be extremely damaging to students that do go on to teach. One way to overcome this dilemma is to offer graduate courses on pedagogy and teaching methodology without making them a mandatory part of the curriculum, thus giving students the option to take these course or not. One issue with this solution is that it does not guarantee that every student that chooses to become a professor has received adequate teacher preparation. One way to avoid this problem is for universities to require that all applicants demonstrate significant pedagogical knowledge and teaching experience in order to be considered for any teaching position. This would ensure that all aspiring professors enrol in teacher preparation courses prior to graduating.
Another barrier to incorporating formal teacher training into graduate programs is money. Universities would require additional funding to employ more professors specifically qualified to teach pedagogy and methodology. One way to fund this endeavour is to increase tuition, however, this is not the most optimal solution. In order to avoid increasing tuition, universities could implement new rules requiring graduate students to acquire a certain number of volunteer teaching hours. This could be accomplished by having students teach one or two lessons to an undergraduate class that is usually taught by their supervising professor. As such, graduate students could gain teaching experience while under the supervision of a qualified instructor. Furthermore, this would still be a valuable learning experience for students who do not intend to teach after graduation, promoting the development of effective and efficient communication and presentation skills.

2) Professional Development Facilities (Teaching Centers)

While providing teacher training to graduate students may help ensure that future professors are more adequately qualified to teach, this does not help to improve the teaching quality of our current professors. One way to accomplish this task is to offer professional development programs for professors who wish to enhance their teaching abilities. Fortunately, most Canadian universities have already established teaching centers that offer workshops and courses designed to help professors improve their teaching skills (Clifton & Rubenstein, 2002). For instance, the University of Toronto opened the Office of Teaching Advancement (OTA) in 2002 to assist faculty members in developing more effective instructional techniques (Bartlett, 2007). The OTA offers a number of workshops including, course and class management, teaching in the laboratory, how to work effectively with teaching assistants, how to use PowerPoint effectively and managing the demands and expectations of students (The Office of Teaching Advancement, 2007a). The OTA also offers a special course entitled “Teaching in the Canadian Classroom”, specifically designed to help instructors that have recently moved to Canada deal with the challenges of teaching in a new cultural environment and improve their speech clarity and communication (The Office of Teaching Advancement, 2007b). Participating
in workshops, such as the ones mentioned above, can help professors improve their management, communication and presentation skills, and increase pedagogical knowledge, thereby enhancing their instructional performance. Facilities such as the OTA can also advise instructors on how to effectively integrate research and teaching. Incorporating one’s research into class instruction can greatly increase instructor enthusiasm and, in turn, enhance student interest; resulting in more effective instruction.

Regrettably, establishing teaching centers has had little effect on the overall quality of instruction in Canadian universities (Clifton & Rubenstein, 2002). In general, professors who function successfully as teachers do so because they enjoy it and pride themselves on performing effectively and efficiently in the classroom. As a result, professors who have positive opinions about teaching may be more likely, than those who dislike teaching, to put in the effort required to improve their instructional skills and become better teachers. Thus, one reason that teaching centers have failed to improve instructional quality may be that the professors who attend the workshops offered by these facilities, are already considered to be excellent instructors. Another reason may be that these facilities are being underused by faculty in general. I attempted to obtain statistics concerning the use of the OTA by University of Toronto professors however, the director of the facility, Ken Bartlett, informed me that while they do have these statistics, they are unable to release them due to matters of confidentiality. Thus, the above hypotheses cannot currently be confirmed (Ken Bartlett, personal communication, March 2007).

Perhaps one way to increase the value of teaching centers and improve instructional quality in universities is to ensure that those professors who would benefit most from attending the workshops are actually required to do so. Presently, professors deemed to be poor instructors are rarely reprimanded for their inadequate performance (Clifton & Rubenstein, 2002). An effective consequence for receiving poor student or peer evaluations may be to require that these professors attend teaching workshops offered by facilities such as the OTA (Clifton & Rubenstein, 2002). This would ensure that poor instructors get the assistance they require to
develop more effective teaching strategies and communication skills, thereby helping to improve the overall quality of instruction at the university.

3) More Effective Use of Student and Peer Feedback

One of the ways in which universities assess teaching performance is through student course evaluation forms. These forms are usually distributed near the completion of a course and require students to answer a number of questions about the instructor and the course, designed to provide an indication of the professor’s overall level of performance as a university instructor (Clifton & Rubenstein, 2002). Evaluation forms can provide university administrators, as well as instructors, with valuable information concerning teaching ability and specific areas that are in need of improvement. Thus, student evaluations can be used by universities to help make decisions about promotions and tenure, and they can be used by professors who wish to make steps towards improving the quality of their instruction. In fact research has shown that instructors can greatly improve their teaching ability using student feedback (Diamond, 2004). Over a two year period, Diamond (2004) conducted mid-term student evaluations for 82 different professors from various academic disciplines who agreed to participate in the study. Mid-term evaluations allow the instructor to make changes while a particular class is still in session and also provide instructors with the opportunity to clarify comments or suggestions from the students (Diamond, 2004). After students completed the evaluations, the results were distributed to the corresponding professors. As a result of the feedback obtained from the survey, a number of the professors altered their teaching techniques, tests, assignments and grading (Diamond, 2004). A few instructors also made changes to course content (Diamond, 2004). Overall, the majority of the professors indicated that they found the feedback very helpful and intended to make use of the students’ suggestions to make changes to their teaching strategies in future courses in an effort to increase their overall effectiveness as instructors (Diamond, 2004). This study clearly shows that as long as instructors are open to student feedback, it can be a useful assessment tool capable of motivating professors to improve their teaching. Student feedback can help them identify their strengths and weaknesses as instructors and provide them with novel ideas for
Peer evaluations of teaching may also be a useful form of feedback for professors who want to improve their teaching, unfortunately peer-review of faculty teaching performance is not a common occurrence. Despite the fact that peer-review of research is widely accepted by the academic community, peer-review of teaching ability is considered offensive by many professors (Gibbs, 1995). If the teaching performance of all faculty members was subject to intense peer-review, this would provide greater incentive to maintain an acceptable level of instructional performance (Gibbs, 1995). Furthermore, peer feedback could provide instructors with valuable insight on how to improve the quality of their teaching and it may encourage faculty members to discuss teaching more openly and share effective strategies.

Unfortunately, the utility of both peer and student evaluations is limited by a number of factors including the professor’s current status at the university, willingness to admit ineffective teaching and willingness to change (Yao & Grady, 2005). Improving teaching quality in our universities may be hindered by the fact that many professors are unwilling to admit that they are not performing effectively as teachers. Furthermore, even if they do admit it, they may still be unwilling to devote time and energy required to improve their performance. As previously mentioned, professors who are found to perform poorly as instructors, especially tenured professors, rarely receive any form of reprimand for their inadequate performance (Clifton & Rubenstein, 2002). As such, even if instructors acknowledge that they are functioning below par, they have little incentive to improve the quality of their instruction. In fact, research has shown a difference in the use and reaction to student feedback forms between tenured professors and instructors that do not have tenure (Yao & Grady, 2005). Yao & Grady (2005) discovered that faculty members that are just beginning their careers experience more anxiety and nervousness in response to evaluation results than tenured professors (Yao & Grady, 2005). The main reason for this difference was found to be that the tenure system provides tenured professors with a sense of security and freedom (Yao & Grady, 2005). In other words, tenured professors do not feel as much pressure to perform, seeing tenure as an exemption from having to maintain a high
level of instructional proficiency. This finding suggests that the tenure system may decrease instructors motivation to improve their teaching, as there is little fear of being reprimanded.

There are at least two ways to address this issue. Firstly, universities can conduct post-tenure reviews. This ensures that tenured faculty members are evaluated regularly and provides incentive to keep their teaching at an acceptable level (Clifton & Rubenstein, 2002). It also helps to eradicate the belief that tenure exempts professors from having to maintain a certain level of instructional effectiveness. Secondly, as mentioned before, professors that are poorly evaluated by students should be required to enrol in teaching workshops in order to improve their instruction (Clifton & Rubenstein, 2002). This provides incentive to maintain a certain level of performance and also ensures that poor instructors receive assistance to improve their teaching skills. Both of these solutions will make professors more accountable for their instructional performance and help to improve teaching quality in universities.

4) Increasing the Incentive to Teach

Overall, the biggest barrier to improving the teaching ability of university instructors is a lack of commitment to teaching. The majority of professors as simply not motivated to become more effective instructors (Young, 2006). This lack of enthusiasm and accountability limits the effectiveness of teacher training programs in graduate school, student and peer feedback and professional development facilities. While it may not be possible to motivate every professor to improve their teaching skills, there are a number of ways in which universities can encourage professional development among their faculty.

Firstly, to increase motivation and thus quality of teaching, the dichotomy that exists between teaching and research must be eliminated. The majority of tenure decisions are based primarily on research ability, with much less emphasis placed on teaching (Gibbs, 1995; Young, 2006). This gives professors the impression that teaching ability is less important, causing them to focus much more attention on research and publication (Gibbs, 1995; Young, 2006). In fact, many professors believe that excellence in research completely cancels out poor teaching ability (Young, 2006). Overall, most professors, and universities for that matter, assign a much lower
status to teaching, seeing it as an interruption to the time they could spend conducting research. Thus, in order to motivate professors to improve their instruction, we must first elevate the status of teaching.

One way to accomplish this goal is to implement a strict peer-review policy for all teaching staff. One of the reasons that research ability may be seen as more valuable is because research is subject to extensive peer-evaluation (Young, 2006). Requiring all instructors be observed and evaluated by their peers may help to increase the status of teaching in universities and motivate professors to become more effective teachers (Clifton & Rubenstein, 2002). Furthermore, as previously stated, peer feedback could provide instructors with valuable insight on how to improve the quality of their teaching and it may encourage faculty members to discuss teaching more openly and share effective instructional strategies.

Furthermore, universities could help to increase faculty motivation to improve teaching quality by increasing incentive to succeed in teaching. One way to increase both the status of teaching and the incentive to be an effective instructor, is for universities to place more emphasis on instructional ability during tenure and promotional decisions. Perhaps universities could try find a more balanced approach to granting tenure, for instance, basing approximately 50% of tenure decisions on excellence in teaching and 50% on excellence on research. Furthermore, universities could increase incentive by offering monetary rewards to departments that achieved excellence in teaching (Clifton & Rubenstein, 2002). Offering rewards to departments, as oppose to individuals, would also encourage departmental faculty to work together to maintain high standards of teaching (Clifton & Rubenstein, 2002). Post-tenure review policies would also help to increase faculty motivation to maintain an acceptable level of teaching performance (Clifton & Rubenstein, 2002). Another way to provide incentive is to require poor teachers to enrol in teaching workshops. Since attending these workshops involves giving up personal time, it is likely that most professors would be motivated to avoid this reprimand and focus more attention on maintaining an adequate level of teaching performance.

Conclusion
Rising tuition fees and recent student demands have focused attention on the need for more effective university instructors (Bartlett, 2007). This paper has outlined a variety of practical ways in which teaching quality can be improved in universities. Incorporating teacher preparation and pedagogy courses into graduate curriculum would help to ensure that all aspiring professors receive instructional training prior to beginning their careers, making them more adequately prepared to handle the demands of teaching. Similarly, requiring that professors who are rated poorly by students or by peers, attend teaching workshops would ensure that inadequate professors receive training in effective teaching strategies, thereby improving the quality of their instruction. Furthermore, if university administrators begin to place more emphasis on student evaluation forms, this would encourage professors to take this feedback seriously and use student suggestions to improve their instructional skills. Unfortunately, the key hindrance to increasing the quality of instruction in our universities is that professors currently have little incentive to improve their teaching ability. In general, most promotion and tenure decisions are based on excellence in research not teaching, promoting the belief that teaching ability is much less important than research ability (Gibbs, 1995). As a result, professors are much more concerned with conducting research and achieving publication, than improving the quality of their instruction. Moreover, professors are rarely reprimanded for poor teaching, further promoting the idea that teaching is less valuable than research (Clifton & Rubenstein, 2002). In order to improve the quality of teaching in our universities, we must first eliminate the dichotomy that exists between teaching and research. This can be accomplished by implementing post-tenure review programs, rewarding faculty for teaching excellence, and placing a greater emphasis on teaching ability during promotional decisions. This will help to increase the status of teaching in our academic institutions and increase professors’ desire to become more effective teachers. Furthermore, implementing more consequences for unsatisfactory teaching performance would make professors more accountable for their actions and motivate them to improve their teaching skills. The bottom line is that until university faculty begin to appreciate the importance of teaching, attempts to improve the quality of instruction in
academic institutions will remain largely unsuccessful.
References


