



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## ESTABLISHING A COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH COMMUNITY

A pinch of reflecting, a dash of observing, a tablespoon of planning, and a cup of collaborating were the critical ingredients that contributed to the success of our first Action Research Summer Institute at Bronx Community College (BCC), City University of New York, in summer 2003. Sponsored by a Title V Hispanic-Serving Institution Cooperative Grant between Lehman College (four-year) and BCC, the Summer Institute was offered through BCC's Center for Teaching Excellence.

Fifteen faculty members from Lehman and Bronx, representing diverse disciplines, participated in a week of intensive workshops and seminars that were designed to help faculty develop and implement research projects focused on teaching.

Consistent with the burgeoning scholarship of teaching movement, action research encourages instructors to come together, ponder questions about teaching, and design studies that lead to instructional innovation. The ultimate goal is improved student learning. The Dialectic Action Research Spiral involves the processes of reflecting, observing, planning, and acting. It is a method of rigorous systematic inquiry that emphasizes identifying an area of focus, collecting data, analyzing and interpreting data, and developing an action plan. This mode of faculty development treats quality enhancement of teaching as an academic venture consistent with research expectations of faculty and, at the same time, allows faculty to take major responsibility for their own teaching. The benefit of this mode of research is that it contributes to both teaching practice and development of theory. In other words, it brings theory and practice closer together.

### An Intensive Week

Participants were daunted at times by the difficulty of formulating fruitful research questions, but they persevered with the aid of feedback from their colleagues. The co-leader of the Institute, a member of the

Department of History, created a Blackboard site for the group and gave a workshop on how to use it. Blackboard was used to communicate during and after the workshop, facilitate literature searches, and exchange information. It allowed members of this learning community to communicate beyond the one intensive week of face-to-face contact.

A PowerPoint presentation provided an overview of the action research process. It included an introduction to action research models, purposes, and methodology. Each day, from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., mini-workshops covered such areas as developing research questions, using descriptive statistics, resources for review of the literature, action research online, data collection techniques, and human subjects regulations. It allowed group members to communicate beyond the one intensive week of face-to-face contact.

### Action Research Plans Developed

By the end of July, every participant had a viable Action Research Plan. One faculty member decided to investigate the effects of using personalization strategies in developing the multicultural awareness competencies of counselor education students. Another planned to ask the question: "How effective is student learning when online students requiring critical analysis of reading material replace time typically used for lecture delivery?" A third planned to examine the use of learning logs as one method of teaching foreign language. A faculty member in mathematics sought to investigate whether students' understanding and performance improved if they had intensive practice in carrying out basic calculations in simple cases involving small random samples. In the area of nutrition, a participant investigated the effects of an online experience in enhancing learning and change in behavior in regard to nutrition. A faculty member from the Department of Nursing and Allied Health was interested in whether there is a difference in student evaluations of teaching/learning preferences between students who show a disposition towards critical thinking and those who do not. Clearly, the research projects covered a diversity of



pedagogical inquiries.

In the second year, faculty investigated instructional interventions as diverse as weekly assignments and take-home test components in a calculus class and strategies designed to motivate students to complete homework assignments in Introductory Psychology. Several faculty members from the second-year group, with the support of the Office of Academic Affairs at BCC, had an opportunity to share the process and discuss their results at a national convention.

### **A Collaborative Research Community**

A collaborative research community where pedagogy could be discussed and examined was established, indeed. Faculty from both institutions learned alongside each other. One participant wrote: "I really enjoyed the collaboration between BCC and Lehman. It was extremely helpful to brainstorm with colleagues from different disciplines to get fresh ideas. Everyone was very friendly and willing to share and help." Another pointed out how positive it was to have "the opportunity to discuss topics that often don't get discussed," and a third stated, "It is a way of leaping over the conservatism of classical research methods."

One of the challenges encountered and not entirely anticipated was the need to meet the IRB (Institutional Review Board regarding Human Subjects Regulations) requirements at each institution. This sometimes created delays, added paper work, and required more training.

During the following fall semester, a reunion was held as part of Center for Teaching Excellence Week at BCC. During the first year, faculty had an opportunity to share their progress-to-date, air problems, and seek the advice of their colleagues. There were surprises—e.g., refining and changing of research questions and approaches. Also, promising models that future action researchers might wish to emulate were established. The sharing and interchange were so rich that not all participants had time to present their studies, and so another meeting was scheduled. Clearly, there was excitement and a strong sense of collaboration. The second-year participants have not yet met. The Summer Institute's goals of bringing faculty from neighboring two- and four-year colleges together to share perspectives on teaching, draw upon group expertise, and support each other in developing individual research projects were achieved.

The collaborative research community will take on new dimensions in the next four years of funding. The professional stance inherent in action research is that teaching is an evolving process and always worth examining in a systematic way. The same can be said about the collaborative effort between BCC and Lehman

College. We are fostering the collective voice from within our two- and four-year college communities in order to define more closely what our teaching seeks to achieve. It is an exciting work-in-progress and one more way that we can serve our students better.

**Harriet Shenkman**, *Faculty Director, Center for Teaching Excellence*

For further information, contact the author at Bronx Community College, W. 181 Street and University Avenue, Bronx, NY 10453-2895.  
e-mail: HShenkman@aol.com