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Six Steps to Making Positive Changes in Your Teaching

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Six Steps to Making Positive Changes in Your Teaching

By Maryellen Weimer, PhD

I’m working my way through a 33-page review of scholarship on instructional change in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) disciplines. The authors reviewed an impressive 191 conceptual and empirical journal articles. However, what they found isn’t impressive both in terms of the quality of the scholarship on this topic and in terms of instructional change in general.

It’s not the first article I’ve read of late on the various barriers that stand in the way of change in higher education. The literature is not encouraging, but I think there are some fairly straightforward principles that give any new teaching strategy, technique or approach a much greater chance of success. Out of that success will grow the courage and motivation to implement even more instructional changes.

1. Think about what needs to change before deciding on a change — I regularly lead workshops on campuses across the country and often worry that there are carts being placed before unseen horses. When I’m asked to present, I’m usually counseled that faculty attending will want techniques, new ideas, strategies that work, and pragmatic things they can do in the classroom. But that’s not where the change process should begin. It should start with a question, ‘What am I doing that isn’t promoting learning or very much learning?’ Or, ‘What am I doing that I’ve probably done the same way for too long?’ Once you see the horse, you can better pick out a cart to put behind it.

2. Lay the groundwork for the change — I regularly object to the “just do it” approach to instructional change, as if we all work in a Nike commercial. The motivation is admirable but every instructional situation is unique. Teachers are different, students are different and we don’t all teach the same content in the same kind of courses. Whatever a teacher does must be adapted so that it fits the peculiarities of the given instructional situation. Don’t just do it before having given careful thought to how the change will work with your content and students, and when you use it.

3. Incorporate change systematically — Beyond adapting the change, teachers need to prepare for its implementation. This means considering when (or if) it fits with the content, what skills it requires and whether students have those skills. If they don’t, how could those skills be developed? It also means valuing the change process by giving it your full and focused attention so as to ensure the new approach has the best possible chance of succeeding.

4. Change a little before changing a lot — Too often faculty have “conversion experiences” about themselves as teachers. They go to a conference or read a book, get convinced that they could be doing so much better and decide to change all sorts of things at once. They envision a whole new course taught by an entirely different teacher. Unfortunately, that much change is often hard on students and equally difficult for teachers to sustain.

5. Determine in advance how you will know whether the change is a success — It’s too bad that assessment has come to carry so much negative baggage, because when it’s about a teacher trying something new and wanting to know if it works, assessment provides much needed of objectivity. If you determine beforehand what success is going to look like, then you are much less likely to be blinded by how much everybody liked it. In this giant review of the change literature I mentioned earlier, only 21% of the articles contained “strong evidence to support claims of success or failure.”

6. Have realistic expectations for success — No matter how innovative, creative and wonderful the new idea may be, it isn’t going to be perfect and it isn’t going to be the best learning experience possible for every student or the pinnacle of your teaching career. Everything we do in class has mixed results; any new approach will work really well for some students, in some classes, on some days. Know that going in, remind yourself regularly, and don’t let it discourage you from continuing to make positive changes.