Teaching Improvement Practices

At Dalhousie University, as at many other universities and colleges, efforts to foster high quality teaching and learning on campus are growing in number. A variety of policies and programs have been implemented to provide incentives and development opportunities for faculty throughout the Dalhousie community.

But what do we know about the relative effectiveness of these practices? How should we best allocate resources and effort? The perceptions of academics and professionals active in the field of instructional development can provide insights for those seeking to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in higher education.

A recent study undertaken by Alan Wright and Carol O'Neil of the Office of Instructional Development and Technology (OIDT)[1] investigated the views of 331 individuals with formal responsibility for the improvement of teaching at universities and colleges in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australasia[2]. The results provide useful information about the kinds of teaching improvement initiatives which professionals in the field consider most promising. This information is presented here in order to stimulate discussion about what we can do (individually and collectively) to enhance teaching and learning at Dalhousie. While not intended as a "blueprint" for action, the information does provide a method for analysing our activities by comparing them to the recommendations of instructional developers in an international context.

The survey respondents rated (on a scale of 1 to 10) 36 practices and activities in terms of their potential to improve teaching at their institutions. Their views of the relative effectiveness of teaching improvement activities are shown in Table 1.

The 36 items were grouped into nine categories containing four related activities each. The categories were then rank-ordered according to the aggregate mean rating. These results are shown in Table 2.

The Crucial Role of Deans & Heads

The group of practices concerning the *Leadership of Deans and Heads* was seen overall as the most influential in terms of improving the quality of teaching. The activities included:
• fostering the importance of teaching responsibilities,
• creating a climate of trust which supports observations of classroom teaching,
• praising and rewarding good teaching, and
• providing funds or opportunities for classroom research.

In general, deans and heads committed to student learning create an environment in which the importance of the teaching function is articulated and supported, and where ongoing efforts to improve are recognized and encouraged. The importance of their contribution has been found to be so great that the authors of one report concluded that "many incentives to encourage good teaching may be fruitless" without the active support of department heads (Rice & Austin, 1990, p. 39).

Assessing and Rewarding Teaching

Employment Policies and Practices are, not surprisingly, seen to be a highly effective way to improve teaching, especially for Canadians, who ranked this category first. Internationally, "recognizing teaching in tenure and promotion decisions" was the top-ranked survey item for all four respondent groups. The Canadian group also showed strong support for "hiring practices which require a demonstration of teaching ability," ranking it 2nd of the 36 items.

Interestingly, while the respondents had the highest levels of confidence in ensuring that teaching performance is appropriately rewarded, they expressed the least confidence in the category *Summative Evaluation of Instruction* (performance assessment pertaining to personnel decisions such as contract renewal, tenure and promotion, and program planning). It ranked last overall and for all national and regional groups.

The respondents' high level of confidence in the teaching improvement potential of the reward system and lack of confidence in teaching evaluation practices seems to indicate that institutions are failing to demonstrate that teaching is valued and that teaching performance is appropriately assessed and rewarded.

But even though changes in employment policies and practices may be highly desirable, simply improving the evaluation and reward systems will not necessarily result in improved teaching. The important role played by material rewards for effective teaching must be accompanied by opportunities for faculty to develop their skills in this area. Several of the remaining categories focus on such activities.

Developmental Strategies

Lack of time, information, and resources are often significant barriers to faculty who want to develop their teaching skills, establish a new course, or change an existing course. Five of the categories dealt with activities, policies, and structures to overcome these barriers. Of these, *Development Opportunities and Grants* ranked highest (3rd overall) and includes grants for teaching innovations (item rank 6th), temporary workload reductions (12th), funds for attendance at conferences or courses on teaching (19th), and sabbatical leaves for improving teaching (24th).

The category *Formative Evaluation of Instruction*, which ranked 4th overall, refers to methods of assessing teaching performance for developmental, or improvement,

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Table 1

International Survey: Ranking of the Potential of 36 Teaching Improvement Practices

1. Recognition of teaching in tenure & promotion decisions
2. Deans/Heads foster importance of teaching responsibilities
3. Center to promote effective instruction
4. Deans/Heads promote climate of trust for classroom observation
5. Mentoring programs and support for new profs.
6. Grants to devise new approaches to teaching
7. Workshops on teaching methods for targeted groups
8. Deans/Heads praise and reward good teaching
9. Hiring practices require demonstration of teaching ability
10. Consultation on course materials with faculty peers (formative)
11. Senior administrators give visibility to teaching improvement activities
12. Workload reduction for course improvement
13. Availability of expert teaching consultant
14. Deans/Heads give funds/opportunity for classroom research
15. Regular (non-t&p) review of faculty teaching
16. Videotaping classroom teaching
17. Faculty review of acad. prog. to improve instr.
18. Seminars on understanding student learning
19. Funds to attend conference on teaching
20. Classroom observation by peers
21. Mid-term student feedback to instructor (formative)
22. Conference on teaching & learning on campus
23. Teaching dossier recognized record of teaching accomplishments
24. Sabbatical leaves for improving teaching
25.* Senior admin. foster institutional pride to stimulate effective instruction
25.* Course materials reviewed in university review process (summative)
27. Importance of teaching made public by senior administrators
28. Senior admin. emphasizes how research supports teaching
29. Faculty committee with mandate for improving instruction
30. Teaching recognition programs (e.g., awards)
31. Annual report on teaching accomplishments (summative)
32. Circulation of articles on teaching
33. Classroom observation by peers/heads for summative purposes
34. End-of-term student feedback for summative purposes
35. Speakers on issues in higher education
36. Readily accessible professional library

* denotes tie

purposes and includes such things as peer observation/consultation, videotaping classes, student feedback, and so on. The item seen to have the greatest potential for improving teaching was consultation with faculty peers regarding course materials (outlines, readings, methods of evaluating student work, etc.)—an exercise we recommend to all professors, both for its benefits in terms of feedback and because it helps to break down the isolation often felt by faculty who have little opportunity to discuss teaching issues with their colleagues.

The category *Structures and Organizations* (designed to enhance teaching) ranked fifth overall. The work of an instructional development centre (the 3rd-ranked item) is seen to be fundamental to a successful teaching improvement enterprise. In general, an instructional development centre like Dalhousie's OIDT plays an important role in improving teaching: directly through a sustained, multi-faceted program of activities and policy development; indirectly as an affirmation of the institution's commitment to teaching and learning.

Respondents had less confidence in the teaching-improvement potential of other items in this category. Periodic, comprehensive reviews of academic programs for purposes of improving instruction ranked 17th. Faculty teaching committees were seen as having little potential to improve instruction, ranking only 29th. Teaching awards were included as a survey item in this category, ranking a low 30th. Awards are made in *recognition* of excellence in teaching rather than as an *incentive* to great teaching, and their impact as a teaching-improvement strategy is primarily through raising the status of teaching.

The category *Educational Events* ranked 7th overall and 4th for the Canadian group and includes on-campus workshops, seminars, speakers, and conferences on teaching and learning. Over the past six years, educational events have been well received and have resulted in a greater appreciation of teaching and learning issues at Dalhousie.

Developmental Resources, the 8th-ranked category, includes both human resources (in the form of mentoring programs for new faculty and the availability of expert consultation services) and print resources (a newsletter and a resource library). Mentoring programs were seen as very effective, ranking 5th of the 36 items. Department heads can encourage formal or informal mentoring relationships to assist new faculty. New and junior faculty feel less isolated as they turn to

Table 2	
Teaching Improvement Practices	
<u>Category Name</u>	<u>Rank</u>
"Leadership: Deans & Heads"	1
"Employment Policies & Practices"	2
"Development Opportunities & Grants"	3
"Formative Evaluation of Instruction"	4
"Structure & Organization"	5
"Leadership: Senior Administration"	6
"Educational Events"	7
"Developmental Resources"	8
"Summative Evaluation of Instruction"	9

established members of the academic community for counsel and encouragement. Senior faculty can derive great satisfaction through participation in the program, drawing on a wealth of experience to support new colleagues and revitalizing their own approaches to teaching in the process.

Top Level Support

While the *Leadership of Senior Administrators* was not ranked highly by respondents overall (6th place), it represents an important element for the Canadian respondent group, who ranked this category 3rd. Respondents saw the greatest potential impact coming from senior administrators' efforts to give high visibility to teaching improvement activities. The Canadians also favoured senior administrators publicly articulating the importance of teaching.

By actively promoting developmental activities, senior administrators send a clear message that the institution both expects effective instruction and will provide faculty with the means to achieve it. Activities which go beyond lip service include circulating memos and announcements about instructional development activities, ensuring that they are included on meeting agendas, urging involvement at a number of levels, and letting non-academic administrators know that activities related to teaching should be a priority in budgetary considerations and in the provision of support services. In these

and other ways, they can help create an organization which puts its educational mission at the centre of its activities.

Summary

This study describes faculty developers' views on "what works" to improve teaching at universities and colleges. Deans and department heads are seen to play a critical role, a result which suggests the importance of their close involvement in a campus instructional development program. This involvement could include working with faculty developers on new and existing developmental programs for professors, especially those designed to meet specific needs at the departmental or faculty levels. Deans and heads can also work with others to promote policy changes so that teaching performance is appropriately evaluated and rewarded. The study also points to the importance of programs which provide both the opportunity and the resources for new and experienced professors to acquire and hone their teaching skills.

In general, fostering effective instruction in a post-secondary institution is best achieved through a campus-wide strategy based on local culture and need. But, as this study demonstrates, the experiences of those in the field of faculty development can pinpoint the crucial elements of such a comprehensive strategy.

[1] Publications on various aspects of the study include:
Wright, W.A. (1994, Summer). Heads hold key to faculty development. *Department Chair* [bulletin], 5 (1), pp. 2-3.
Wright, W.A., & Associates. (in press). *Teaching improvement practices: Successful strategies for higher education*. Bolton, MA: Anker.
Wright, W.A., & O'Neil, M.C. (1994). Teaching improvement practices: New perspectives. *To Improve the Academy, 13*, 5-37.
Wright, W.A., & O'Neil, M.C. (in press). Perspectives on improving teaching in Canadian universities. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, XXIV-3.
[2] Respondents included directors of faculty development centres, heads of teaching committees, administrators responsible for teaching. Since the researchers are part of this population, Dalhousie is not represented in the respondent group.

Reference

Rice, R.E., & Austin, A.E. (1990). Organizational impacts on faculty morale and motivation to teach. In P. Seldin & Associates, *How administrators can improve teaching*. Bolton, MA: Anker.