



Innovating Teaching and Learning: Reports from University Lecturers

Adamová, Ludmila; and Muráriková, Petra, eds.
Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2013

Book Review

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Innovating Teaching and Learning is the final product of a summer program and an extended follow-up *Inquiry into Student Learning* initiative based in Slovakia in 2011 and 2012. Participants from a wide range of disciplines were required to identify a specific learning challenge within an existing course, design a “pedagogical innovation” (8) that would address this challenge, implement the innovation during the following teaching semester, and document the results of the innovation in a report for the program coaches. The editors identify the core chapters of *Innovating Teaching and Learning* as the best reports emerging from the innovation projects.

“Innovation” in the context of this volume refers to a shift in focus from an instructional paradigm to a learning paradigm. In short, this means placing students at the center of teaching practice: “teachers should focus more on how their students learn rather than placing importance on their own performance as teachers” (8). Following principles of student-centered practice, participants in the program applied pedagogical theory to specific course challenges, challenges organized into five overall sections in the volume: improving student pre-class preparation, teaching large classes, teaching courses rich in complex terminology, enhancing student abilities of theory application, and making assessment an effective tool for student learning. Their reports include a brief introduction to the particular pedagogical challenge in question, an outline of the theoretical background for the innovation, descriptions of research design and findings, discussion of areas of difficulty, and suggestions for future improvement. For example, Katarína Hrnčiarová (33–40) introduced blog assignments as a way to motivate students to read assigned literature in her philosophy course, applying theoretical work on student motivation, blended learning, and the use of blogs in higher education. Anna

Vallušová (83–91) designed worksheets for students in her microeconomics class in order to encourage students to actively make connections between economic models and real-world practice. Vallušová reports that students who had failed the course in the previous year reacted most notably to the innovation, showing “surprise and enthusiasm when they had realized that certain theories corresponded with phenomena they knew from real life” (88).

The main strength of this book is its presentation of “small innovations”: targeted learning strategies designed to meet a particular learning challenge or outcome within a course based on applied pedagogical theory. The theoretical work behind the innovation projects moves the volume beyond a simple “teaching tips and tricks” manual, balancing practice with theory. Each project was fairly small within the scope of a course, the idea being not to overhaul a course but to introduce change gradually in order to effectively ensure that learning activities and assessment align with learning outcomes. As each project was small, teachers were able to easily document and reflect on the impact of their respective changes. *Innovating Teaching and Learning* is an important resource for stimulating critical reflection on teaching practice. For example, after implementing a project similar to Hrnčiarová’s blog assignment, I discovered new strategies for advancing student learning by motivating students to read. This reflection also enabled me to think about collecting documentation on my discussion starters project in order to critically evaluate the results.

The editors themselves recognize the major limitations of *Innovating Teaching and Learning* in their concluding chapter. The most frustrating limitation for participants, receiving comment in a number of reports, was the limited control of the instructors involved (mostly graduate students) over their courses; seminar leaders or those teaching from a pre-set syllabus could change small components of a course, but could not change content or major components of student assessment. Findings sometimes indicated disconnections between the objective of the innovation and the course methods of assessment. The volume is, however, an accessible starting point for those wishing to more thoughtfully integrate classroom activity with pedagogical research.

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