
Research

Linking Research and Practice: The Consumer Validation Approach

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There is increasing interest in ways to bridge the proverbial gap between research and classroom practice. This increased interest is due, in part, to the relatively recent emphasis of researchers on teaching effectiveness. Also, the shift to the basics and the demand for improving standardized test scores has caused educators to seek ways to improve classroom instruction. For many, the research findings which correlate teaching behavior with student achievement are seen as a potentially valuable resource. The problem, however, is disseminating the research findings in a way that teachers will use them in their individual classrooms.

Traditional approaches aimed at getting research into practice have enjoyed only limited success. There has been an almost exclusive reliance on the expository mode to deliver research findings to teachers. That is, most research dissemination efforts consists of either telling teachers of new research findings or simply disseminating the findings in a printed format.

The missing element in this expository approach is what Lionberger (1965) defines as *legitimation*—the process of becoming convinced as opposed to simply becoming informed. Legitimation, he points out is the process by which fears are dispelled and favorable disposition leading to the acceptance of innovation is achieved.

In agriculture, for example, research findings about a new fertilizer become legitimized when farmers have tried the new product and witnessed the positive results. In fact, the agricultural model of research dissemination is an elaborate network involving agricultural experiment stations, county extension agents and demonstration farms. In Education there is not a well-planned process that allows teachers the opportunity to test research findings. Teachers are simply asked to accept research findings and innovations on face-value.

The Consumer Validation Approach*

The basic idea behind the consumer-validation approach is to put research findings to the ultimate test: Does it work in the classroom? And teachers, the consumers of research, become testers to determine the effects of implementing research findings in their classrooms. This Consumer Report approach is based on the philosophy that teachers are more likely to take seriously research findings that they know have been classroom-tested (legitimized) by other teachers.

The consumer-validation process involves three steps: research reporting seminars, classroom testing and sharing sessions.

The Research Reporting Seminars

The purpose of the research reporting seminars is to enable teachers to learn about selected research findings. For example, a particular seminar might focus on the research dealing with time on task while another might deal with research related to classroom management. Whatever the research area, it is important that the research findings be synthesized and made as clear and concise as possible. This process of gathering, synthesizing and translating research findings so that they can be more easily understood by teachers is the cornerstone of the research reporting seminars.

After research in a particular area has been presented and discussed, forms are given to each teacher. This form is the record-keeping aspect of the process. The form contains three parts. Part one describes the research findings in the particular area of focus. Part two consists of a blank page with the heading, *Description of Classroom Behaviors Engaged in While Attempting to Implement the Above Research Findings*. In this section, teachers list and describe the things they did in their classrooms as they attempted to implement research findings. Part three of the form is another blank page with the heading, *Analyze What You Think and Feel About What Happened When You Tried Each of the Behaviors Listed in Part Two*. As teachers reflect on the results of their classroom efforts, they tend to become more analytical about their teaching. Also, this part of the form allows teachers to critically evaluate the research findings.

Classroom Implementation

After each seminar, teachers try out various ways of utilizing the research findings that have been presented in the seminar. This requires a degree of creative thinking to develop specific classroom activities or teacher behaviors to ef-

fectively implement specific research findings. While the research findings are generally clearly stated, the ways and means of attempting to put the findings into practice in the classroom often are not so clear. An example would be the time on task research. While it seems clear that increasing students' quality time spent on learning tasks will enhance the probability of achievement, it is not explicit as to what specifically is to be done in the classroom to increase quality time on task. Teachers may find it helpful to get together and brainstorm ways in which to implement specific research findings. As teachers try out various activities they record their activities and reactions on the research record form.

Sharing Sessions

After teachers spend a period of time (usually three to four weeks) developing and implementing ideas and activities in their classrooms, they meet in a session to discuss and share what happened as they attempted to implement the research findings. These sessions serve a couple of purposes.

The first and most obvious purpose of these sessions is to share activities and ideas. Because teachers share their ideas and activities with each other, the quality of ideas that each teacher learns is greatly increased.

Of course, not all the ideas and activities that teachers try will prove useful. Some have very positive effects while others may prove to be marginal in value. Still others, while seeming like good ideas initially, just may not work in the classroom. This type of shared teacher analysis and evaluation is the second important aspect of these sharing sessions. Teachers learn to evaluate research findings as they become more analytical about their own teaching.

A major goal of these sessions is to have teachers interact with each other teaching. It should be noted that teaching is rarely the focus of meetings that teachers are asked to attend. Simply increasing the dialogue among teachers on the topic of teaching can have a very positive effect on enhancing teachers' sense of professionalism. Another value of the sharing sessions should be mentioned. Teachers tend to perceive the ideas of their colleagues, i.e., other classroom teachers, to be more creditable than the ideas of college professors or researchers who are not on the firing line, that is, attempting to teach youngsters day after day in the classroom. It is professionally enhancing for teachers to use each others' experimentation and judgment rather than relying almost exclusively on the ideas of people outside of classroom settings for sources of information about improving classroom teaching.

Implications for Teachers of the Gifted

The educational consumer-validation process has important implications for those who teach in gifted programs. The process should be beneficial in promoting shared analy-

sis and evaluation of the research and teaching among those who fill similar roles and have similar interests and needs due to the fact that they work with groups of students with special and unique characteristics, such as gifted students. This kind of process allows those who teach gifted students to engage in experimentation with the research findings and apply those findings to a particular and unique type of student. Too, this process which emphasizes teachers developing classroom activities and instructional approaches and then sharing how well they worked with their colleagues would enable teachers of gifted students to learn many ideas that other teachers have found to be successful.

An example of applying the consumer validation process to the teaching of gifted students is in the area of individualizing instruction. During a research reporting seminar teachers could be exposed to the work of Clark (1979) in which she extends the work of Ward and others by categorizing the characteristics and needs of the gifted into five domains: cognitive, affective, physical, intuitive, and societal. Clark also provides examples of classroom strategies for each domain.

Teachers could use Clark's work as a basis for developing additional instructional activities. For a period of three to four weeks teachers might try the instructional activities suggested by Clark as well as those they develop themselves. After the trial period, teachers could meet in a sharing session to discuss the work of Clark and the effects of the activities they tried. If twenty teachers tried only four new activities each during the trial period, the group would have generated eighty activities designed to individualize instruction based on the needs and characteristics of their students.

More important than the quantity of activities is the fact that the activities would have been field-tested by classroom teachers. This provides the credibility that is essential if teachers are to accept and use new instructional strategies in their classrooms.

Teaching gifted students puts pressure on teachers to develop activities and approaches that are challenging yet realistic. The consumer validation approach to utilizing research findings as a source of information for instructional improvement, yet also emphasizing teacher testing of these ideas in their classrooms, offers a means for teachers to share with each other ideas that work. More importantly, it creates a climate where teachers can become more analytical about their own teaching. This reflective climate alone can do a lot to create an atmosphere for improvement that is not only practical but professionally healthy.

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