



Teacher Enquiry is the Key to Learning

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Teachers in two colleges in the East Midlands found that they had a common problem. How could they motivate their students to do the written work essential to their success and to do the additional independent work that would get them the higher grades? So they set out systematically to investigate the motivational effect of competition between students. Involving over 100 students in a range of subjects/vocations including engineering and hair dressing, these lecturers surveyed the students in advance, tried out a variety of competitive and non-competitive approaches and then asked the participants how they responded to the different approaches. They also monitored results and found some significant gains from introducing competitions into their teaching methods. You can find out more about this specific research study, one of the LSIS-sponsored Lab Site projects run by CUREE, at <http://repository.excellencegateway.org.uk/fedora/objects/import-pdf:2192/datastreams/PDF/content>.

This is one of many excellent examples of practitioners finding out whether different approaches work for different learners in their classes and workshops. Discovering why things do and don't work differently for similar and different groups of students makes for

**“High quality research and enquiry . . . can enable practitioners to distinguish myth from reality and help identify strategies that have the best chance of success in the contexts in which they work.”
(BERA 2014. p11)**

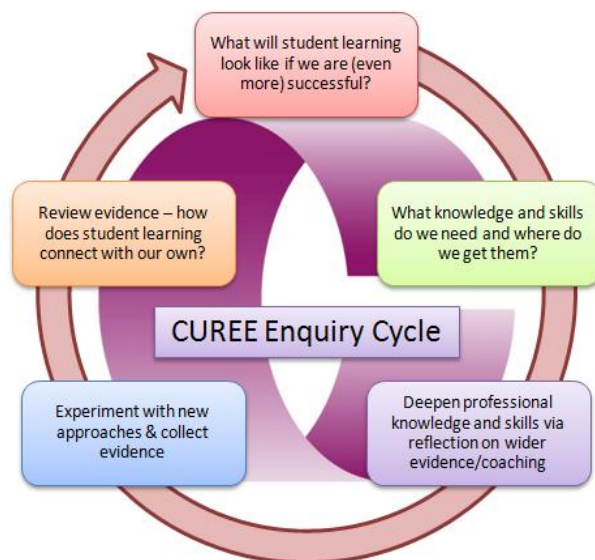
professional learning conversations that matter. The new Professional Standards help us recognise this by highlighting the role of research, evidence and theory in our own development and learning. Put simply, research means being more systematic about what we do and exploring the links between that, how students respond and the way they do (or don't) progress. As Lawrence Stenhouse put it, “research is systematic enquiry made public” (Stenhouse 1981, p104). Using theory means using relevant large scale evidence to identify the principles or underpinning rationale for core practices so we can make effective, more strategic professional judgments.

Teacher judgments matter. Large scale evidence about how teachers learn tells us that it is *evidence informed* professional learning not *evidence based* practice that is effective. Prescription doesn't work. Nor is it simply a matter of “common sense” where teachers go through the motions of trying out approaches highlighted by evidence whilst hanging on for dear life to existing and comfortable ones despite evidence that students might achieve more by doing something different. Teachers' professional judgments about their students' starting points and progress and their accountability to students, each other, their employers and their profession helps distinguish the two.

The rest of this article uses a report commissioned by the British Education Research Association (Cordingley, 2013) to explore some practical starting points for exploring current practices and the

research related elements of the new standards to enhance our experiences of teaching and learning and to student success.

So how can we best inform our enquiries with relevant existing research? The internet makes accessing evidence about best practice easier. Exchanging web links for relevant research is the lifeblood of a huge number of teacher tweets and tweetmeets; the Excellence Gateway, ERIC database, NTRP website and Jim Crawley's its life web site are great starting points. The LSRN have shown how networks between universities and colleges can connect researchers and practitioners. The evidence suggests we should go beyond headlines in using what's known already to think about the accessibility and quality of the evidence we tap into. Having quick and easy access to research summaries helps. For example, CUREE's interactive multimedia [research Route-maps](#), help teachers engage with research relevant to their priorities in different ways through their organisation's VLE. Teacher friendly summaries and readymade micro-enquiry tools are designed to take a few minutes at a time and be woven into weekly planning sessions and meetings. Research informed, work based professional learning of this kind might usefully be called teacher enquiry, rather than research. Then we will be clear that we are looking at everyday ways to improve our practice in an informed way, without worrying about research technicalities, hierarchies and terminology. This is an expansion of the familiar 'plan, do, review' cycle, starting with clarity about what students' learning will look like if we succeed and what we want to change to get there. Routines such as learner feedback, team discussions about struggling students, peer teaching and review or observation and feedback sessions all provide good starting points for doing this. The CUREE Enquiry Cycle opposite illustrates this graphically.



The research about effective professional learning for teachers also tells us that we can't do this effectively alone. The key to using evidence well is opening ourselves up to other people's perspectives on what we do and how our students respond. Sharing the risks involved in reviewing

this kind of evidence builds trust and deepens commitment to persisting until we have something exciting but challenging properly nailed. Do you have untapped opportunities to support this kind of work, for example within approaches to peer coaching or developmental observations?

Through building enquiry into daily working lives, teachers can shape learner experiences directly in their own classroom. But we need to challenge each other with the confidence of trusted and informed professionals. The new standards and the recently published BERA report on teacher research are telling us why it's time to move forward: after all even though Australia came to the use of research party later than we did in the UK, it's firmly built into their world class support for professional standards now (<http://www.aitsl.edu.au/>).

Download the professional standards <http://www.et-foundation.co.uk/our-priorities/professional-standards/professional-standards-2014/>

Putting enquiry to work: LSIS case study from Hereford College of Arts

Student questionnaires and focus groups showed that feedback wasn't always helping learners see how to improve and took too long to receive. Students on an Art and Design level 3-4 qualification submitted work and then didn't see their tutor again for two weeks while it was being assessed.

An internal review also highlighted variations in feedback from different tutors.

The team looked at on-line research on assessment for learning approaches and the benefits of working collaboratively at key assessment points. A new model of learning was developed which would help learners to:

- See evidence of good practice in the work of others through group assessment sessions
- Develop presentation skills through individuals presenting their work
- Evaluate their own and each other's progress through digitally recorded self assessment and peer comment and dialogue
- Negotiate their own targets and assessment grade

More positive student feedback on assessment resulted and the approach has been shared and adopted by other curriculum teams within the college.



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