

Research-based Instructional Programs Focused on the Professional Development of Educators – WIDE World

Wayne MALCOLM

Akita International University

The complex narrative that is global education makes it so that educators – teachers and administrators – have to continuously, at a high order, maintain their skills. Advancements in technology have made it so that governments can no longer afford to let their professional educators remain underdeveloped (Fletcher and Zuber-Skerritt, 2007). This paper will advocate for research-based instructional professional development programs; more specifically, it will be discussing the validity of, as well as continuously referencing the Harvard Graduate School of Education developed WIDE World Online Professional Development Program.

In support of research-based instructional professional development programs the author will explore the determining factors for wanting to use such programs; what an institution of education aims to achieve by implementing a research-based instructional program; and how research enhances the ability to make sound decisions. On the last point, how instructional leaders convince staff that such programs are effective and worthwhile will also be discussed.

WIDE World

The assertion can be made, with a high degree of confidence, that Harvard University is one of the premiere institutions of higher education in the World. According to U.S. News and World Report: Best Colleges 2010, Harvard is ranked number one (U.S. News and World Report, 2009). TOPUNIVERSITIES.com gives Harvard a *world* ranking of one (QS Intelligence Unit, 2009), and within that ranks the Arts and Humanities, Life Sciences and Biomedicine, and Social Sciences departments number one (QS Intelligence Unit, 2009). It would be safe to say that a program that carries the Harvard brand is a quality program worth exploring.

WIDE World is an online-based (there are also options for face-to-face programs) professional development program that employs the use of the *Teaching for Understanding* framework. (For more specific information on Teaching for Understanding visit the website –

see the Appendix for the address.)

There are a variety of programs that are “continuously evaluating results, redefining goals, and revising designs for learning” (Harvard University a, 2009). The end result of this process, and the action research used throughout the process is research that “will generate instruments, methods, and findings to guide other organizations committed to systemic improvement” (Harvard University b, 2009). This complies with the criteria for what is a research-based instructional program as defined by the United States Department of Education, which calls for methods of inquiry to be rigorous, peer-reviewed, significant in their depth of questioning, objective in the tools and instruments used to collect and explore data, and can be relied upon by other practitioners, scholars, and/or leaders in the field (U.S. Department of Education stated in Delisio, 2006).

A brief look at WIDE World’s website and one can navigate through the success stories of this program; listed are the Kentucky Department of Education, New York City Public Schools, and Jordan Education Initiative (Harvard University c, 2009). While gaining positive results with domestic school systems, and international clientele is proof that the WIDE World program works, the argument could be made that on Harvard’s website they are naturally going to promote the successful stories – obvious good public relations. A valid criticism indeed, but considering other organizations such as Ryan Institute for Market Driven Education (RIMDE) in Mumbai, Maharashtra, India, The Tapestry Partnership, based in Scotland, and Maryville University in St. Louis all subscribe to this program fulfills another one of the hallmark qualities of a research-based instructional program – it is replicable and adaptable. These programs are not listed on the Harvard website for WIDE World. (For more detailed information on these organizations see visit their websites – addresses are in the Appendix.)

Determining factors

The opening sentence of this paper identifies the most consistent reason for professional development programs – the world has become, and continues to evolve into a more complex place. It should be obvious that education is a continuously changing field. “Professional development is therefore a costly part of what governments, professions, companies and individuals must do to operate most efficiently, in responding to contingencies and seeking to build platforms for sustainable growth in the face of continuous change” (Fletcher and Zuber-Skerritt, 2007, p. 73). Programs have changed to try and keep up with how students learn, and with that educators need the same development.

Derived from this broad requirement for professional development, and the author's own personal experience, other factors that could lead an educational institution to adopting a research-based instructional professional development program are lack of cohesion amongst faculty – a non-communicative environment where ideas and philosophies are not shared can create an unhealthy tension, as well as misunderstanding of guiding department principles; continued misalignment across curriculum – without adequate communication faculty may operate a class without ever considering how it factors into the larger picture setting up a scenario where a disconnect with other classes might occur; and finally, gaining an awareness of the information and resources available to educators in order to perform their jobs – information literacy is vital because without knowing the current body of research that drives a profession educators cannot give up to date instruction to their students. Once again, these are not the only factors, but ones the author, upon reflection of his own personal situation has identified.

Goal setting and implications

When deciding why to enter a research-based instructional program there should be a set of attainable goals. The captain of a boat, or a plane would not set out on a journey without a destination in mind, thus it is crucial to have some kind of direction when it comes to entering a professional development program. In this regard, the WIDE World program utilizes a tailored approach to determining what exactly an institution hopes to achieve by embarking on this course of action (President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2009).

As far as the author's personal situation is concerned, desired outcomes could be increased communication between teachers by way of regular teacher meetings, recognizable alignment of courses across the overall curriculum, and increased knowledge of how to access current literature and research concerning second language acquisition; knowing how to utilize the vast array of university information technology resources. The WIDE World professional development program offers a wide array of programs to accommodate these goals. Upon consultation with colleagues and the program developers a suitable program would be chosen and embarked upon. (For detailed program descriptions visit the WIDE World website – the address is in the Appendix.)

Why research-based programs

In this section the author will answer the question of, “why enter a research-based instructional program?” One could propose that a staff retreat would sufficient in upgrading skill sets, and foster a communicative spirit amongst teachers. While those outcomes are

possible, a research-based instructional program takes a more scientific approach to professional development. This approach gives professional development programs the confidence that what they are doing is grounded in reliable methodologies. “Scientific research gathers information about significant questions; uses objective methods that involve reliable and valid observations and measurements; and meets rigorous standards of peer review. The conclusions of scientific research can be replicated and generalized” (United States Department of Education as cited by Education World, 2002). Following a research-based instructional program gives the best opportunity for successful professional development.

Making well-informed decisions

Every day problems arise that pressure decision-makers to have to make difficult choices vital to their organizations. Lack of adequate information resources can make these decisions more difficult. Lack of knowledge about how to utilize information-gathering resources can make the decision all but impossible (The American Library Association’s Presidential Committee on Information Literacy (ALAPCIC from now on), 1989). For this reason it is imperative that a sense of urgency be placed on the fact that not only using research, but also knowing how to access it, is vital to success as an educator.

Teachers and administrators are very busy people, but having a leader who understands the fact that by using the available research already constructed time can be saved, is priceless. A leader must “be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information” (ALAPCIC, 1989, para. 3). By promoting research methods such as action-research, “a systematic, reflective, and collaborative process that examines classroom and school issues to plan, implement, and evaluate change” (Warren, Doorn, and Green, 2008, p. 261), leaders can encourage staff to engage and contribute to a pool of research. They can also put staff directly into a situation where they will have learn how to access research. The result of this process is a teacher who makes better-informed decision based on a proven research methodology, and is able to access information. WIDE World emphasizes these points – researching current information as well as using that research to make informed, rational and logical decisions.

Conclusion

“Scientifically based instructional methods equip teachers with tools that help them better reach children, avoid burnout, and improve their classrooms' culture of learning and achievement”

(United States Department of Education as cited by Education World, 2002). This paper advocates adoption of such programs when seeking professional development opportunities. More specifically this paper advocates usage of WIDE World Online Professional Development Program. It is a quality program that encompasses all the qualities of a high order research-based instructional professional development program. In this time of rapid global change, and with the continued strains placed on educators to keep current with the ever-changing face of society, utilizing the technologies involved in all the changes is one of the best ways to attain success.

Leaders also need to know how to motivate staff by advocating the use of research in decision-making. Engaging in action research can give teachers the opportunity to do this. Making the classroom a research facility not only keeps one engaged, but also saves time because a teacher does not have to schedule in observations of another class. The data gained from such research can go a long way to shaping decisions on how to implement curriculum, and guide instruction. This process creates a better more effective teacher (Warren, Doorn, and Green, 2008).

And finally, the main thing to remember is that even though this paper advocates for teacher and administrator professional development, it is placed in the context of student enhancement. We cannot have good students without having good teachers and administrators.

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Appendix

Maryville University in St. Louis -

<http://www.maryville.edu/academics-ed-wide-online-courses.htm>

Ryan Institute for Market Driven Education (RIMDE) -

<http://www.andhranews.net/India/2008/February/12-Ryan-Institute-33287.asp>

The Tapestry Partnership -

http://www.tapestrypartnership.co.uk/courses/harvard_wideworld.asp

Teaching for Understanding - <http://learnweb.harvard.edu/ALPS/tfu/info2b.cfm>

WIDE World - www.wideworld.gse.harvard.edu