

Giving and Receiving Instructional Advice

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How much instructional advice have you heard over the years? How often when you talk about an instructional issue are you given advice, whether you ask for it or not? Let's say you're a new teacher or you're teaching a class you haven't taught before or something unexpected happens in your class; if you'd like some advice, all you need to do is ask. Anybody who's spent any time in the classroom seemingly has the right to offer advice. And if you'd rather read advice, there's still plenty offered in the pedagogical literature, to say nothing of blogs and other social media sources.

Some of the advice offered by colleagues and in articles is excellent. Most of us can recite the good and wise things we've learned from fellow teachers. But not all instructional advice is equally good, and it's not always easy to separate the good advice from advice that is decidedly ho-hum or just plain not very good. The problem is that really bad advice can be delivered articulately and with great conviction. So when a colleague offers advice or you read an article that tells you what you should do about some instructional issue, here are some criteria you can use to consider the merits of what's being offered.

First, the advice should always be preceded or followed by some sort of discussion of why you should be doing whatever is being suggested. In the pedagogical domain (as opposed to the parental one), it isn't good enough to say here's how you do it and you do it this way because I said so or because that's how I do it. There needs to be some sort of educational rationale behind what somebody is telling you to do. "Don't use take-home exams."

Why not? “Don’t let students call you by your first name.” Why not? “Don’t give in to demands for extra credit.” Why not? The assumptions on which the advice is based need to be revealed so they can be considered and assessed.

Second, the advice needs to be laid up against what you think you know and have experienced in class. That doesn’t mean you have a corner on truth. You can believe some things about teaching and learning that simply aren’t true, but advice that flies in the face of what you believe and what regularly happens in your class should be questioned. There is something to be said about trusting your gut; at the same time there’s something to be said for not trusting it completely.

Third, how does the advice square with the evidence? For teachers who don’t read much educational research or pedagogical literature, where the weight of the evidence falls isn’t always known. Reading more, even a bit more, helps a lot with that issue. The fact of the matter is that virtually every aspect of teaching and learning has been studied, and most aspects have been studied at length. Classroom practice could easily be evidence based if teachers knew the evidence and were willing to act on it. But even without a thorough knowledge of what’s known, you can (and should) ask those offering advice if there’s research or evidence that stands behind what they’re recommending. If they can’t cite any, that doesn’t mean there isn’t any, but it does mean that the advice isn’t being offered in light of it. Moreover, those not all that conversant with the evidence can certainly ask those who are or those who might know where to look for the evidence. Advice and opinions ought to be regularly considered in light of the evidence.

Finally, if you’ve gotten some advice that kind of makes sense but you’re still not totally convinced, run it past a colleague you trust. “Somebody told me I should ...” or “I read in this article that teachers should ... and I’d be really interested to know what you think about that.” You may have a colleague whom you trust, one who is a dear friend and fellow researcher, but that doesn’t mean that that colleague is pedagogically sophisticated. So run your instructional quandaries past those colleagues whose teaching you know to be good and whose insights about pedagogy you have found to be wise.

I think all of us ought to be a bit more careful about offering advice, particularly the definitive here’s-exactly-how-you-do-that kind of instructional advice. If something works well for us, that doesn’t guarantee it’s going to work equally well when another teacher who teaches a different subject and larger classes tries to use it. Making suggestions, proposing alternatives, exploring options, and asking questions is a better way of helping someone who looks like he or she might want or need advice.

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