

Center for Applied Research in Education
Brown Bag series

The Brown Bag series for the academic year 2014-2015 are summarized below.

Induction day

Faculty members across four faculties and three departments and centers attended the induction of “Developing our Approaches to Research” and “Program for Learning and Teaching Excellence”. During this session, we went through the results of the faculty consultation carried out during March 2014 and the Brown Bag program that was developed based on the findings. All attendees were invited to give their input on the topics to be covered. Minor changes to the program were made based on suggestions regarding focus topics and sequence of sessions.

Developing our Approaches to Research

Hot topics and grants

The session focused on finding topical issues and up-to-date and innovative research in one’s specific field. We discussed how faculty members find innovative topics, who sets the agenda for important research topics, and how does one move to the next area of research. Faculty members mentioned that conferences, readings, donors and governments often give them ideas on important and innovative research questions. In some instances, these topics are not directly related to their field of specialization.

The literature review

The discussions were guided by four main areas of writing a literature review: (1) purposes of writing a literature review, (2) theoretical and empirical fields of literature to review, (3) disciplines to consider and (4) presentation of the review. We concluded by questioning when opinions were appropriate in a review and how to best search for information.

Interviews and conversations

CARE invited Eric Van Ommering, a PhD candidate at the University of Amsterdam, to share his experiences in collecting data during his two-year ethnographic study in Lebanese public and private schools. Discussion covered areas like ensuring voluntary informed consent in sensitive settings, capturing formal and informal conversations and noting emerging themes when transcribing. Interviews were also seen as an opportunity to think about new hypotheses and research questions.

Ethics and human subjects

Faculty members from three faculties were present. We discussed issues and practices when trying to achieve voluntary informed consent and giving recognition to individuals who contribute to the research study. We also discussed the importance and need of an institutional research board. Ethics guidelines from the American Psychological Association and the British Educational Research Association were handed out.

Course design and development

One of the more dynamic seminar sessions, the group discussed ways of reading and developing the syllabus. Attendees from across the faculties looked at basic yet challenging questions that aimed to support approaches to reviewing the course objectives and learning outcomes. A constructive and rich discussion that carried throughout the lunch hour focused on examining visions of the course, finding innovative ways to motivate students, incorporating innovative approaches into learning objectives, examining the logic and aims of the objectives stated in the syllabus, and sharing how learning objectives are reviewed when faculty members receive course feedback. Discussions also resonated debates on how we use concepts of higher-level thinking and the relevance of Bloom's taxonomy when considering and planning second-order concepts. For example, some faculty members argued that certain levels of thinking were sequenced from low to high depending on the course levels.

Active learning

This session focused primarily on feedback and how students use this feedback. The discussion started with sharing experiences on opportunities we give students to produce work, how we give feedback and examples of how and when students use the input. This notion of active learning is based on a cycle of Do, Review, Learn and Apply that was developed by Dennison and Kirk (1990) and further examined by Watkins, Carnell and Lodge (2007). Throughout the workshop, instructors from different faculties also described their own understandings of active learning. For instance, some normally ask their students to prepare a presentation on a chapter and prepare case studies before they start their topics. The examples prompted a discussion on the quality of feedback provided. We explored Hattie and Timperely's (2007) four types of feedback: task, process, self-regulation and self. Faculty members were invited to bring samples of their students' feedback to share during the next session.

Collaborative learning

During this session, we focused on basic principles of collaborative learning, namely producing new work while or after learning from others. Discussions focused on students' levels, the class layout, the number of students and the level of the course. Various examples were shared across the faculties. Some were concerned about certain students' attitudes where underachievers can sometimes take passive roles leaving the higher achievers doing most of the work, which results in both parties not benefiting from collaborative learning.

Formative and summative assessment

The session opened with a brief definition of formative and summative approaches to assessment. Debates arose when faculty members started to share their approaches to giving feedback, writing exams, grading work and extra credit. Some shared practices on how they find out how much the students have learned in order to move on the next task, including the use of colored cards as traffic lights. Others have found it necessary to motivate students through assessment activities like giving extra work for extra grades. Some faculty members argued that helping students perform better during exams was important and, thus, objective question formats like True/False and multiple choice questions helped in achieving this.

Classroom management

Despite the only one faculty member, a discussion still carried throughout the lunch hour on practices that seem to motivate and give structure to the students. Some included: start teaching on day 1, establish a verbal contract, assign graded tasks for groups of 2-3 during each session without putting pressure on passive students, use mobile phones for accessing resources like dictionaries, constantly show confidence in low achievers, treat all fairly by being clear about how one is going to grade and refer back to that when there are issues in grading at the end of semester, individually recognize hard working students, and give students who seem to need more time an extra 2-3 minutes. The conceptual reading that was provided focused on giving students choices to learn, how to learn, what to learn, and how to they would like to be assessed.