

# Overwhelming? Yes! Valuable? Definitely!

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‘Please, not another assignment.’ Our class was informed that each student would be responsible for creating, organizing and conducting an action research project during our student teaching experience. This assignment’s intent was to give us a tool as teachers that we could use to increase our effectiveness. As students, all we could envision were the countless hours that this research project would require.

Late nights lost in stacks of periodicals, struggling to stay awake as we typed just one more paragraph, not to mention collecting and analyzing the final data. Why are they adding one more task to an already overwhelming student teaching experience? However, as we write this article nine weeks later, we are able to reflect upon the experience with an entirely different outlook. Once we recognized the useful application of this project, we became excited and eager to improve ourselves as educators through exploration and implementation of a wide variety of methods. What began as a just another assignment, turned into a very valuable tool in a matter of weeks.

## *Righty or Lefty?*

It is a well-known fact that people are usually either right or left handed, but who would have guessed that this concept had a direct effect on teaching? At the end of my first week of student teaching, my cooperating teacher and I discussed my progress.

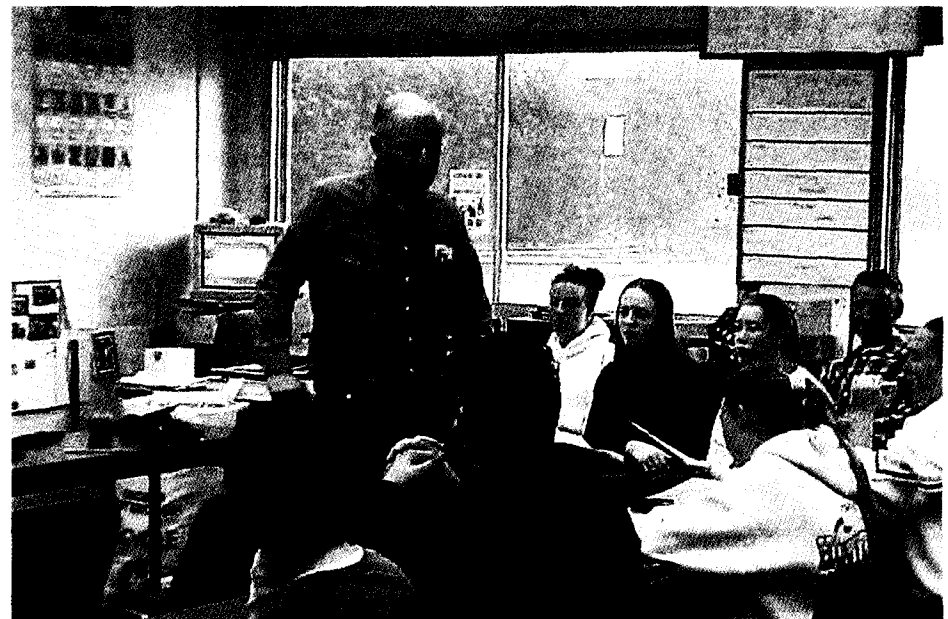
He brought to my attention the fact that I often directed myself towards the left side of the classroom. My body position was oriented in that direction as well as the majority of my hand gestures and eye contact. But why was this happening? What could I do to change this? Questions such as these flooded my thoughts. And then it hit me; two little words that my professor had mentioned came rushing back – action research. With the help of my cooperating teacher, I had designated a challenge and now had the opportunity to find a solution.

My greatest endeavor would be to locate the stimulus for my left-sided communication. Did I favor the left side of the classroom as a result of the students who were seated there? Or, was it because of the physical orientation of the room itself? *The Effects of*

*Classroom Orientation on Interpersonal Communication* became part of my everyday teaching experience. I was more aware of myself as an educator, speaker and presenter and strived to find ways to evenly communicate with my students. I was able to directly involve them in my research by allowing them to complete data sheets and record their observations. They assisted me in creating new seating arrangements and were ready to relocate themselves whenever necessary.

This was a process that did not lend a solution overnight, but eventually, I arrived at a method of classroom orientation that worked well for me. I learned that there is no *right* answer to a situation such as this. Instead, I learned that you have to experience a number of approaches through trial and error until you find the method of in-

## Dr. Joe Sabol leading student teachers on an action research lesson at CalPoly-San Luis Obispo.



struction, or in this case arrangement, that works best for you as an individual.

### *Blocked Out*

Imagine back to your student teaching days. You come into the class in the middle of the school year and take over teaching where your cooperating teacher left off. Your college professors and cooperating teacher have prepared you to take on this daunting task. You are ready, but there is one burning question in the back of your mind: "How do I keep all of these students on task and learning for 90 minutes straight?"

As a student teacher in a school that utilized the 90-minute block period, I was faced with this very dilemma. I was prepared to deliver information to my students and I had been introduced to basic classroom management concepts. It all seemed so easy, but I soon found out that I was wrong. Delivering information to students is relatively simple when they are on task, but the question was *how* do I get them on task? How do I keep my students interested in what they are learning? How do I create a desire to learn? These are all questions that we, as educators, must ask ourselves. However, when we are working in longer block periods, as opposed to traditional 45-50 minute class periods, these questions become much more prevalent due to a considerable decline in attention spans.

How do we determine the best way to teach in the block schedule, or any schedule for that matter? *Action Research!* As a student teacher, I was put in the setting of trying to keep students' attention while teaching them for 90 minutes per day. This is a challenging task for experienced teachers, much less beginning teachers. I quickly found out that the traditional lecture and guided practice methods were not the most effective for teaching students and maintaining interest, so I had to find

a way to incorporate other methods.

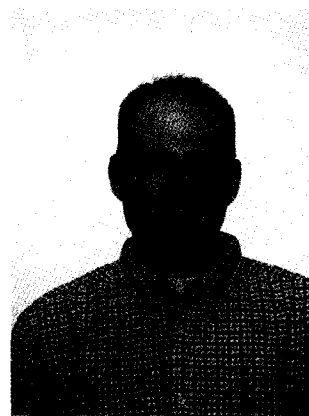
In order to determine how to best utilize the block period I created a plan for an action research project. I took into consideration what other teachers had tried as well as some of the historical theory behind block scheduling. Using information from my initial research, I created an implementation plan involving different methods of instruction. My goal was to determine which teaching methods held students' attention and which were most helpful in retaining information. I also hoped to find out which methods could be utilized together to add greater variety to daily lessons. Through action research, which included researching the topic, developing an implementation plan, collecting data, and analyzing the results, I was able to gain some insights that have helped make *me* a better teacher.

### *Research...Taking...Action!*

Although these two action research topics are entirely different in content, they share many commonalities. An effective teacher is always looking for ways to improve upon his/her teaching abilities, as well as getting students more engaged in classroom activities; action research provides us with a systematic approach to do so. Whether or not we realize it, we are conducting action research projects on a daily basis. Throughout the course of our student teaching experiences, there were numerous things that we tried in relation to classroom management, organization and various other teaching methods. If they were successful, we stored them in our repertoire. If they failed or worked less effectively than we would have hoped, we tried to determine if there was a better way to utilize them.

The take-home message is not to be hesitant to try different things in your classroom. If they are successful – use them, if not, keep trying to determine

how you could make your attempts more effective. One of our cooperating teacher recommended, "Don't be afraid to try new things. If they work, great; if not, that's okay, too." The students are not the only ones learning. Action research allowed us to not only "try new things," but also to investigate why our strategies worked or didn't work. We both agree that we are better teachers as a result of our action research. Guess that assignment was pretty good after all.



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