

Teaching workshops fail to spur learner-centered teaching

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Professional development workshops for college teachers, designed to encourage the use of active, "learner-centered" teaching methods, may be less effective than the participants believe, according to research reported in the July issue of *BioScience*.

Diane Ebert-May of Michigan State University and her colleagues studied the [teaching](#) of participants in two such established programs for faculty teaching introductory biology courses. Although after the workshops most of the faculty judged themselves to be providing the favored, learner-centered teaching, which encourages [student engagement](#) and exploration rather than lecture-style presentations, analysis of video recordings showed that most of the participants were still using traditional styles of teaching up to two years later. More experienced teachers were less likely to adopt the favored teaching styles than early-career teachers.

Ebert-May and her five coauthors examined data from two multi-day programs, one of which occurred over several years and one of which was repeated annually. Both programs led to participating faculty knowing more about inquiry-based teaching, as expected, and a large majority of them also reported later in [questionnaires](#) that they were actually using such practices. But 75 percent were not in fact doing so substantially, according to Ebert-May's study. The researchers state that the results call into question the value of the self-assessment method frequently used in education studies, and recommend that in future, researchers should rely on validated independent assessments of teaching

performance. Although a lack of support from colleagues for adopting learner-centered teaching methods is often suggested as an explanation when they are not adopted, the participants in Ebert-May's study reported that having insufficient time was the main impediment to their revising their teaching.

Ebert-May and her coauthors conclude that changes are needed in professional development programs if they are to bring about real improvements in teaching practice. In particular, they favor providing participating faculty with more opportunities for direct practice of what they have learned. "Instant replays of teaching with expert commentary may become our most powerful tool to improve outcomes," they conclude.

Provided by American Institute of Biological Sciences

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