‘Fear of Looking Stupid’

ANTHROPOLOGIST OFFERS EXPLANATION FOR WHY FACULTY MEMBERS HESITATE TO ADOPT INNOVATIVE TEACHING METHODS. 26 COMMENTS

By: David Matthews for Times Higher Education July 6, 2017

An anthropologist who had the unenviable task of sitting through academics’ meetings and reading their email chains to find out why they fail to change their teaching styles has come to a surprising conclusion: they are simply too afraid of looking stupid in front of their students to try something new.

Lauren Herckis was brought in to Carnegie Mellon University to understand why, despite producing leading research into how students learn best, the institution had largely failed to adopt its own findings.

For example, one of the university’s online courses in statistics, which has been shown to be “incredibly effective at teaching students in half the time,” was not adapted by the statistics department for use on campus, said Richard Scheines, dean of the department of humanities and social sciences. “This is a source of real frustration,” he told the Global Learning Council Summit 2017 in Berlin last month.

Herckis observed academic bureaucracy up close in meetings and through emails for more than a year, and tested lecturers’ attitudes through surveys and interviews.

She followed the progress of four projects to improve teaching -- such as the introduction of a test to assess students’ strengths and weaknesses before starting their courses -- two of which failed.

One of the stumbling blocks, she found, was that “a desire to get good [student] evaluations posed a risk to their willingness to innovate.”

But an even stronger source of inertia was the need to hang on to their “personal identity affirmation” -- in other words, to avoid appearing stupid in the lecture hall. One academic interviewed by Herckis said that faculty members’ “No. 1 challenge” was to make sure that they were “not an embarrassment to [themselves] in front of … students.”

Herckis also found that many academics clung to a “very strong” idea of what constituted good teaching that they had often inherited from their former professors or even parents, even if other evidence was available. One interviewee told her that, above all, he wanted to emulate an inspiring lecturer he had been taught by in 1975.

“When our gut tells us to do one thing and an article tells us another,” Herckis told delegates, it is very difficult to change behavior. Another issue was that faculty were much more likely to be more

enthusiastic about making a change that they had come up with by themselves, rather than adopting something tried and tested by others.

With universities in many countries under pressure to improve their teaching quality, the project could be of interest to other institutions seeking to overturn ineffective teaching methods. Scheines argued that higher education needs to invest far more in similar anthropological projects to work out how change actually happens. “We need ears and eyes telling us what’s happening on the adoption,” he said.

About 20 years ago, clinical medicine created an entire field of “implementation science” to check whether doctors were adopting best practices, and higher education now needs to do the same, he argued.

In line with the project results, Carnegie Mellon lecturers would be showered with “love” and told not to “worry if students hate you for a semester” if they experimented with new ways of teaching, he said.