Focus on Teaching

Last semester, you all created research projects which seek to investigate what will happen when you make a specific change to your teaching. Your research questions focus on what will happen with your students after you make this change. Yet, this is missing the intervening “black box” of your own teaching. What is going on in your head as you make these changes, which then influence student understanding?

In your final paper (and in analytic memos #2 and #3), in one section, you will be describing your own teaching and the sense you are making of it. You will seek to answer the question: What did my teaching look like when I was enacting my action research project? What were the challenges I experienced? What went well? We don’t want to read a description of your ideal class. We want to get a sense of what it was like to be teaching while conducting this action research project. We want a complete picture, warts and all. Change is inherently difficult and uncertain. We want that uncertainty and challenge to be reflected in your description of your teaching (along with the highlights, of course). What did your “average” day during your action research project look like? What types of things varied across these days? You will be quoting extensively from your teacher journal to construct this description of your “average day”. Thus, it is critical that you make time each week to thoughtfully write in your journal.

We know how busy teaching is, especially when you are taking a graduate level mathematics class and are involved in multiple extracurricular activities, while trying to collect and analyze data around making a change in your teaching. Don’t let your personal journal be the data you neglect to collect when life gets busy. You will be turning in your teacher journal at the end of the semester. It is expected that you will have a minimum of 10 weekly entries, reflecting on the teaching reflection and other reflection questions (see handout).

As you read other handouts (Revised Teacher Journal Prompts, Analyzing Collected Data, Analytic Memos, Final Paper Guidelines), you will see more details about how to include a focus on teaching in the products of your action research.

As you look back over your research questions, if you do not have a question that specifically addresses your teaching, you will need to add a question. You do not need to add forms of data collection; your teacher journal will serve as the primary form of data to address this question. Below are some samples to give you some ideas about what this new question will look like:
• What does my teaching look like when I challenge and support students in vocabulary instruction?
• What does my teaching look like when I challenge and support students in oral reasoning?
• What does my teaching look like when I try to better teach problem solving to my students?
• What happens to my teaching when I institute student homework presentations?
• What happens to my teaching when I start providing students with answers to the homework ahead of time?
• What happens to my teaching when I shorten homework assignments but include more word problems?
• What happens to my teaching when I try to incorporate weekly Habits of Mind problems with my students?
• What happens to my teaching when I try to incorporate cooperative learning in my classroom?
• What happens to my teaching when I include more projects in my mathematics curriculum?
• What happens to my teaching when I limit student access to calculators?

As you read through this sample list, you hopefully see a pattern. Your focus here is on YOU: what happens to your own teaching when you try to make this change? How do you actually go about implementing your action research project? What do you DO in your classroom that helps increase student understanding?