

Two sides of the same coin: faculty doing research

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Interview with Richard Sagor

Berg: Why do you think it is important for faculty to do research—especially at the community college level—when our job is to teach?

Sagor: For people who have responsibility for managing other people's learning, being an active learner yourself is a great asset. Research casts us in the position of learner. And certainly, the very act of teaching makes us learners. But when you are doing research and you put yourself in the learner's shoes, it adds another dimension to the process.

Berg: I'm not sure I understand. I know that last fall I taught a film class for the first time and did a lot of reading about film to prepare for the class, but I would not consider that to be research.

Sagor: You are right. That does certainly cast you in the role of learner by doing all of that reading, but it was not research per se. But when you taught the film class for the first time, if you did some research on the effectiveness of your teaching or on the strategies you were using in teaching the film class, you would be casting yourself in the role of learner and that would be action research.

Berg: What do you mean by "action research"?

Sagor: Fundamentally, action research is research that you are doing on your own action. You personally become the focal point of the research, trying to understand how to do better what you are engaged in doing, to understand some of the dilemmas or problems you are facing in your work. In traditional research, you are researching somebody else's actions. In action research, you are researching your own actions.

Berg: *This semester I have been trying to incorporate film in my research methods class. My theory is that showing short films will help students associate the topics better. If I somehow study those students, would it be action research?*

Sagor: Absolutely. In fact, look at the language you used when you say that. You said, "my theory is that..." and your research would be about the adequacy of that theory. I don't remember your exact words—"My theory is that if they see the films, they will thus, thus, and thus." Studying whether that hypothesis bears itself out is action research.

Berg: *How would I go about doing good action research?*

Sagor: First, be very thoughtful of the outcome you are looking for, the performance that becomes the dependent variable. Second—which is probably the most important—be deeply thoughtful about your theory of action. Why are you doing what you are doing? What it is that you are doing that you will be investigating? You need to tease out what actions you think will make the difference on your dependent variable. We call that a theory of action.

Berg: *In the research methods class, I didn't just randomly pick the films. I thought that they would help students make specific associations. Is that thoughtful action?*

Sagor: That is part of your thoughtful action. But a part of the thoughtful action is just that films themselves would do it. Then that these particular films will. Then your theory may go further, that the films need to be processed with the students through classroom discussion or writing about the work. That whole set of actions that you are initiating to cause the students to make greater associations is your theory of action.

Berg: *The current class is already under way and I don't have any data from another class to compare it to. Is that going to be a problem?*

Sagor: If you are doing classic experimental design research, you would need to have a control group and baseline data. But action research is more like ethnographic research where you

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- are trying to illuminate a phenomenon. You don't, by necessity, need to compare one phenomenon to another phenomenon in order to describe as robustly as possible the phenomenon that is occurring.
- Berg: *Maybe at the end of the semester I could do student surveys or another type of assessment tool and then report on what happened?*
- Sagor: Absolutely. Even if you do not have a pre-survey and are just doing a survey of the students after the fact, you could ask students "Before you took this class, did you think...." Or "what happened in this class...." They might be able to give retrospective evidence on how things may have changed.
- Berg: *That seems much less imposing than having to do formal studies in graduate school.*
- Sagor: One of the nice things about action research is that it is basically a set of techniques that help us do our work—something we already have to do—better and more thoughtfully.
- Berg: *Why do you think community college faculty don't do more research?*
- Sagor: It's a time factor. They have generally a very heavy teaching load as well as an advising role. The time to do traditional research—which is totally separate from the work you have to do—requires you to manufacture time that does not exist.
- In action research, you are spending your time working on something you already have to be working on. It's a multiplier of impact. You are using the same time and getting more impact from it.
- Berg: *Community college faculty might say, "I am teaching five classes this semester and I don't have time to reflect."*
- Sagor: In the university, many people have research agendas that are quite different from what they are teaching. But at the university your time is structured, and your load is determined in such a way that you could have two jobs. Job one is being a teacher. Job two is being a researcher. At the community college and in the K-12 system, it is much easier if those two agendas are two parts of the same thing. With action research, I am doing research on my own work and actions, and it is killing two birds with the same stone.
- Berg: *Yesterday, I was cautioning students about $N=1$. Is there any validity in looking at what I am doing in one class?*
- Sagor: Yes. Reporting on the N of 1 is fine. But what you can't do is generalize from it. There is a rich history, well established, for
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case study research. Case study research is by definition single case research that has $N=1$. Now you do that to illuminate a phenomenon. You cannot generalize to a larger population of cases. But what you can do is create a valid and reliable report on what happened in that singular case. And people find that very useful. When we are telling the story of what we learned in a systematic way, we are reporting on research.

In doing action research, part of what we often leave out is that we do not report it to anyone. I think it is a really good idea for community college faculty to do action research and then at a conference report on the data. It enables the entire academy to grow based on your experience. But it is also a chance to wave a flag to show you are doing significant work and to be acknowledged for it.

Berg: That acknowledgement and recognition can be important. Besides going to conferences, are there other ways we can publish or distribute our action research.

Sagor: There are numerous journals and there seem to be more and more all the time that are interested in publishing action research. Probably the most common way to disseminate research is still through the written journal.

Berg: At the end of the semester, if using film in my research methods class works and I want to share it in published form, where do I start?

Sagor: I am not sure of the journals in the field of film and pedagogy. But I am sure that there are numerous ones that would find an article like that interesting to their readers.

Berg: As you are aware I have also interviewed Howard Tinberg who edits one of those journals. But maybe the issue is self confidence. I need to be able to say "I could publish here."

Sagor: Right. You are reporting on the impact of your theory of practice.

Berg: One of the concerns I have heard expressed about action research is that it is not rigorous enough academically, that it does not rely on what other people are doing, that it is "I observed it in my classroom and that is good enough."

Sagor: We can put as much rigor as we like into our action research. For example, we could do a literature review. Sometimes we don't, but we can go a long way to situate what we are studying by reviewing the literature in the field. Then, in terms of the data collection, what we always recommend is that action

researchers triangulate their data by using multiple sources of data for each phenomenon they are reporting on. This adds to both the validity and reliability. I guess what I would say is that it is possible to do non-rigorous action research but there is nothing to prevent us from doing rigorous action research. Some action research would not stand up to the scrutiny of peer review, but other action research could survive a rigorous peer review process.

Berg: I have seen some studies that give action research a bad name because the authors tried to overstate their findings.

Sagor: That is what we were just talking about, about not generalizing from the single case study. We have to be careful when we are doing action research because we are almost always working with a small sample size; we don't pretend that we have research that has generalizability. What we do have is valid and reliable case study research.

Berg: "I do this in my classroom and it might work in yours."

Sagor: In a way, I would prefer, "I did this in my classroom, and I am going to show you a valid and reliable report on what happened. I am going to describe the context of my classroom clearly to you. Then you decide—based on what you have heard about my classroom—whether you think the shoe fits."

Berg: That makes sense. We do that when we get together with our colleagues.

Sagor: Exactly. We do it intuitively. Even in medical research, which is rigorously scientific, the doctor is saying, "Do I think this finding will apply in this particular case?"

Berg: What can a dean do to support and encourage action research because it would make the teaching at a college better?

Sagor: There are a number of things. One is to let you know that the work is valued. That is done informally by letting you know that your efforts are appreciated. Formally, it is done by providing opportunities where action research can be shared internally. For example, we have the case where the audience at a conference you are attending will become tuned in to what you are learning through your action, but it may be that people in your own department are not even familiar with what you are learning. So the dean should consider everything—from brown bag seminars to in-house conferences where people can share their action research with each other—as one small way to support the work.

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- Berg: *A couple of years ago I attended a conference for distance learning where a number of my colleagues and I were presenters. We went to each other's seminars. Someone made the comment, "It's too bad that we have to leave town to talk to each other."*
- Sagor: I remember one time when I went to a conference and in reading through the conference program I found out what the research agendas were for members of my own department. It was the same department, and I did not even know what they had been working on.
- Berg: *Our new Director of Distance Learning has just instituted brown bag seminars as a way to ensure we don't have to leave town to find out what each other is doing.*
- Sagor: That's excellent. And I do suggest providing some type of institutional support for the dissemination of the research, such as helping you finance your way to a national conference at which you are presenting.
- Berg: *Is it possible to take action research into the classroom by working with students?*
- Sagor: Absolutely. I would look for ways to involve your undergraduates as partners.
- What is nice is that they are partners in carrying out the action research. They have a vested interest in how it comes out. It is a great apprenticeship for them as future academics.
- Berg: *One way might be to have them do the literature review we talked about.*
- Sagor: Exactly. That is something that will save you time, but it is also an academic benefit for them because a literature review is a natural type of academic work. Then, if you ultimately write a publishable article, they have the opportunity to become a co-author with you. So it is a way of trying to find multiple benefits for the multiple partners on the research team.
- Berg: *Yesterday, a student in my class made a comment about some work I am presenting at a conference. I thought, "I wish I could take him with me." But there is probably no reason I couldn't.*
- Sagor: Exactly. It enables students to graduate from school with a much richer vitae.
- Berg: *I want to thank you for taking the time to talk with us about action research.*
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Interview with Howard Tinberg

Berg: Last October you wrote an essay that was published in The Chronicle of Higher Education in which you argued that it is important for community college faculty to participate in research. Could you tell me why that is important?

Tinberg: Given the nature of community college teaching—especially given the vast amount of teaching that community college faculty do—perhaps it is more important for those faculty to remain critically and intellectually engaged with their subject and to feel that their work has a kind of intellectual weight. Beyond that, there is an important need to understand the teaching itself. That is where the classroom based research comes in. Because there is so much teaching that is happening, it becomes almost routine to move from class to class. But I wonder if we are really examining what is happening in front of us. So the research I see is important on two fronts. First, I would say it is enlarging the culture of the two year college to include the intellectual work and exchange of that work. Second, it allows us to better understand what is going on in those classrooms.

Berg: You mention that we do a tremendous amount of teaching. Some might say, “Teaching four or five classes is overwhelming enough. How could I possibly have time to do research on top of that?”

Tinberg: I understand that question, but I think the concept of research itself that is being drawn upon is limited. The research that I am talking about is somewhat unconventional. Maybe in some ways you could refer to it as the scholarship of teaching and learning. It is based to some degree on the classroom as a site for research. My quick response is that the research I am talking about will enable the teaching rather than become an obstacle to it or a hindrance in some way.

Berg: In graduate school, I had to write a dissertation. How does that help my teaching?

Tinberg: This ties into a rather thorny subject at my community college and others about the role of the Ph.D. in the faculty work. I

think there is a kind of attitude that one can take from graduate studies as well as a familiarity with methodology that can be applied to the type of research I am talking about. A Ph.D. is not required, of course, to do this type of research. But there is a habit—or way of asking questions—that comes with doctoral work that can be very useful.

Berg: *Maybe the question shows the type of misunderstanding you are getting at. I am thinking that people who do research will spend hours in the library looking up small points. But you keep talking about the classroom. So what is it that I am missing?*

Tinberg: That to teach without examining in a rigorous or systematic way what is happening in the classroom is to teach blindly. And the habits of inquiry and methodology that render information are all important to our understanding of the work itself. Another aspect of research that is crucial is creating an exchange of teacher scholars who can then share their work with each other to break down some of the isolation that is inherent in two-year college work. As we go from classroom to classroom and section to section, we have little opportunity to talk to one another about what is near and dear to us. I think we need to find time within the week and within the day to have a scholarly exchange.

Berg: *I'd like to talk more about scholarly exchange, but I want to make sure that I first understand what you are getting at. In one of my classes a few years ago, over 30% of the students cheated in the course, and that is something that usually doesn't happen. Part of my response to that was to say, "What is going on in the literature?" I started to study the issue of plagiarism. Is that the type of research you are talking about as coming from the classroom?*

Tinberg: Absolutely. That is very concrete. Another response might have been to simply punish the students. First of all, you are determining that a certain percentage of students were cheating. That is important. Then you went on to ask, "Is this a phenomenon that is occurring elsewhere?" And if so, "Why?" These are questions that lead to deeper inquiries. I think that is a good, concrete way to pursue this conversation.

Berg: *By reviewing the literature, I discovered that I was almost setting myself up to get plagiarized papers by how I gave the assignment.*

Tinberg: Exactly. I have a *Chronicle of Higher Education* column on my door that urges us to stop being plagiarism police and to start looking at our pedagogy as we give our assignments. There is no plagiarism-proof assignment out there, but we can do

more to minimize the cheating.

Berg: *After I do the investigation, it is not sufficient for me to say, "Ok, I have learned it for myself." I then need to share it with others.*

Tinberg: Yes. Let me go back to more conventional scholarship. Unless it is shared, unless there is an exchange, unless there is a way to validate the experience, it becomes so localized that it is not adding to the knowledge that we have about teaching. That is why the scholarship of teaching is so interesting to me. The efforts of the Carnegie Foundation are to make the efforts visible. We need to let others see what is going on in the classroom.

Berg: *As far as exchanging or publishing information, I think that gets back to the issue of isolation. That especially those who teach at small colleges often don't have colleagues in the same way that someone at a larger college or university has colleagues. One might be the only full-time faculty member teaching "X" discipline. How can a person in that position become less isolated?*

Tinberg: First of all, I think it is important to regard yourself less departmentally and more as part of a collegial, interdisciplinary network. Some of the most fruitful and exciting work occurs when folk from a variety of disciplines come together to talk about teaching methods. So I would urge the one person department member to branch out and to seek collegial exchange with members of other departments. Some really interesting things can happen that way.

Berg: *A few years ago, several colleagues and I presented at a conference on distance learning. We ended up sitting in on each other's sessions. Someone commented, "It's too bad that we have to leave town to talk to each other."*

Tinberg: [Laughs] I've had that experience, too.

Berg: *What are things that a faculty member or administrators could do to help get those conversations going without having to send faculty members to a conference?*

Tinberg: It depends on the local networks and structures you have on campus. My campus has peer partnerships where folk literally sit in on each other's classes and engage in conversations about their observations. I know that scheduling drives everything. And with five-course loads it can be difficult to find time to engage in those conversations. But I believe that we can use our time more wisely than we currently do. I know that there are things that have to happen administratively,

but I would like to see more of the professional staff meeting time taken up with substantive teaching matters.

Berg: *What types of incentives can we provide to make this happen?*

Tinberg: Some colleges provide points that work toward promotion and tenure. I could see some faculty being quite concerned about such a system because they would see it as a type of creeping four-year college move. I understand that. I think in some ways that there are small things that could be done to recognize the work of people who are presenting papers and publishing. Maybe various receptions or collegial exchanges that highlight the work of individual faculty members could be held. I think it is recognition that can come in a variety of forms. Certain concrete rewards can be given especially to those folks who are doing scholarship that is focused on their teaching. That can be a very powerful model for all. We need to demonstrate that teaching is being improved through this type of scholarship. We are talking about a change in a culture. That is a difficult task.

Berg: *Sometimes colleagues who are generous people are not generous about sharing their teaching materials. Do you have any idea why that is?*

Tinberg: Some people see teaching as a privatized experience; something that is a direct result of personal inspiration and perspiration. I would like us to move away from that model to a more collaborative, social model; a more collegial model of teaching. I think many survived a culture where the classroom was sacred space. They perhaps never saw other faculty doing that type of thing. Some might see this as their own intellectual property, but I suspect it is a matter of working with a model that they know best; the teacher alone in the classroom. We can provide alternative models that would not diminish the work of the individual faculty. Rather, sharing would validate the work of the faculty member. I think most folks would agree that that is the way to go. Most of us are looking for professional validation of some kind.

Berg: *In your Chronicle article, you suggested that some faculty at community colleges have inferiority complexes. Rather than feel validated by sharing, they might actually feel they are not up to snuff.*

Tinberg: Yes. That is oftentimes an issue behind a refusal to share. My view is that if I can start things by sharing missteps such as assignments that were not designed as well as they could have been, it could be an act of generosity to get other people to

talk frankly about their work. At some level we are able to get to know each other professionally by sharing the work.

Berg: *Have you seen any models where people have provided internal support particularly well?*

Tinberg: Yes, I have. Mostly in the last few years I have become involved in the Carnegie Academy discussions on teaching and learning where I have seen both local and regional clusters of colleagues who are interested in the scholarship of teaching. At Middlesex Community College they have done particularly good work in setting up teaching circles on their own campus and in being a center for other two-year colleagues to become part of the conversation. The models are there, most definitely. As is often the case with community colleges, each college is so different—even within the same state—in reflecting the culture of the community. It is the “community” part of the community college that is both our strength and sometimes our weakness when we become too local.

Berg: *While you were talking about models, I thought of one locally. Some historians at small public and private colleges get together once a semester for lunch and two presentations—one on pedagogy and one on somebody’s academic research—and some chit chat. That is the type of thing you say we need to do more of.*

Tinberg: Absolutely. I have had this experience at my own college when we invited a nicely credentialed academic scholar who is a remarkable teacher. We had not had such a speaker in a while. It does something to the culture of a place to have a speaker like that. I think it also makes us feel good that we are part of the larger discussion and not just production workers.

Berg: *I have seen that attitude of production work applied to community college.*

Tinberg: It is hard to break out of that mind set. We need to pause and think about our work whenever we have the opportunity instead of continuing to get caught up in the sweep of the schedule.

Berg: *You have suggested that because we do so much teaching that we have something to say to universities. What are ways that we can contribute to a discussion of teaching? Let’s say I’ve done research inspired by my classroom; how do I take the next step besides sharing it with my colleagues here?*

Tinberg: Are you full time?

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- Berg: Yes I am.
- Tinberg: One of the complications is the status of people at the college.
- Berg: *Could you address that? Not all of our readers are full time.*
- Tinberg: The increasing numbers of adjunct and part time faculty members in higher education can be very different in background and vary from department to department at a single college. They are not all alike. But what is clear is that the part time faculty members often do not have a voice in the governance of a college. Sometimes collegial exchange can be limited because of travel schedules. Having said that, I know that there are more and more opportunities for adjunct faculty to become part of ongoing professional development activities whether in a center for teaching or not.
- Berg: *Would you say that adjunct faculty—like full time faculty—need to do research?*
- Tinberg: Absolutely.
- Berg: *Let's go back to the more formal type of research, such as writing a paper for publication. What if someone reads this interview and says, "That's a great idea and I've discovered something in my classroom that I would like to share with people. But I don't know how to do that any more. It's 10, 15, 20, 30+ years since I have been in graduate school, and I know things have changed." What type of advice could you give that person?*
- Tinberg: That they have to become part of the conversation again. That they need to go to regional and national conferences. I edit a journal that has various features such as articles that balance theory and practice. But we also have a section called "What Works for Me." We've encouraged people who are teaching English to see this as an opportunity to write up the nature of an assignment, what the set of expectations were. It's a good opportunity to get back into the conversation but also to feel that they can share the aspects of a particular assignment in a scholarly publication. I think that there are other journals out there who have readers who want to look at concrete assignments.
- Berg: *I know this journal has some of that balance where someone could do a review as well as write up something that is very formal.*
- Tinberg: Exactly. Serving as a reviewer is a very good way to learn about particular aspects presented in a book and to find a good way to get your work published. It is one of many avenues to become part of the larger conversation.

Berg: *Besides giving recognition, are there other things that the administration can do to encourage faculty to disseminate their research?*

Tinberg: When I was hired, my assistant dean made a point of who was doing the writing and publishing and then sharing it around the department. I really liked that move. Whether people read it closely or not, it is important to send it around and to find a way for folk to look at the work. The small role of sharing the written work of publications or portions of work can make a difference for many folks.

Berg: *Do you have any final thoughts?*

Tinberg: I think we have all to gain and very little to lose by doing the kind of research I am talking about. It will invigorate us. It will challenge us. It will intellectualize our work. It will benefit especially in respect to our role in higher education. We do a lot of extremely good teaching. And I think it is important for those outside of two-year colleges to understand the quality of the work we do as teachers. What I want four-year colleges to realize is that we are reflective practitioners.



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