

John Wooden, Teacher Extraordinaire

In this intriguing article in *Quest*, Bradley Alan Ermeling (University of California, Los Angeles) shows how John Wooden, the legendary UCLA basketball coach, used four key insights on teacher inquiry. Wooden always insisted that everything he did with his highly successful teams from 1946 to 1975 he learned teaching high-school English in the 1930s. Here's what he did with his teams and how it relates to all teaching:

- *Identify and define important and recursive instructional problems specific to the local context.* In other words, teachers should tackle problems that have immediate relevance to their students' learning challenges. At the beginning of every basketball season, Wooden zeroed in on one area of team weakness. "The goal was to uncover all he could learn about the particular topic and apply that to his teaching through testing, refinement, and elaboration," says Ermeling. "Like any classroom context, Wooden and his coaching staff were responsible for a whole 'curriculum' of important subject matter to cover over the course of the year (rebounding, passing, team defense, free-throw shooting). He worked diligently to teach well all of the fundamentals, but he chose one specific area at a time to slow down and focus his deeper professional growth and study."

- *Prepare and implement detailed instructional plans.* "The details are where the complexities of teaching reside and where teachers confront the various instructional choices that will positively or negatively influence student outcomes," says Ermeling. Wooden was famous for his "lesson plans," and he often said, "Failure to prepare is preparing to fail." Wooden planned by the year, week, and day, his planning time was sacred, and everyone knew not to interrupt.

- *Use evidence to drive reflection, analysis, and next steps.* More important than ultimate results – state tests, basketball games won – are formative assessments, which can be used to evaluate the impact of plans and actions and drive continuous improvement. "Student work, student interviews, student questionnaires, checklists, self-assessments, portfolios, systematic classroom observations, test results, audio or video recordings from the classroom, are all potential sources of data that teachers might use to inform their investigations of a selected problem," says Ermeling. Wooden kept a record of every practice in a loose-leaf notebook, and before every session, he gave 3x5 index cards with instructions to his coaches and managers. They wrote observations, ideas, and improvements on the back, and after each practice, he would meet with his staff and make decisions on what to do next.

- *Persistently work toward improvements.* "In teaching, coaching, or any profession," says Ermeling, "one of the under-emphasized features of continuous improvement is the goal-oriented persistence required over a period of time to understand/resolve a dilemma and discover specific cause-effect findings about teaching and learning." Wooden studied books and articles, observed other coaches, tested detailed plans for practices, and refined his ideas. His investigation of free-throwing revealed a set of basic techniques (feet a little wider than shoulders, balance, right-handers shooting slightly to the left of center, left-handers slightly to the right of center), not messing with what successful shooters were doing, working on free-throws at the end of practices, creating game-like pressure on players to perform when they were exhausted and in the spotlight, and not over-doing practice.

Ermeling says that studies of U.S. teachers participating in successful inquiry projects reveal three critical lenses or mindsets:

- The researcher lens – Formulating hypotheses, collecting data, and relying on evidence to make decisions and generalize from the data;
- The curriculum-developer lens – Sequencing and connecting students' learning experiences;
- The student lens – Viewing instruction through the eyes of learners, anticipating their thinking, and using this to build students' understanding.

“Teacher and coach education programs would do well to create opportunities and learning experiences that foster the development of these life-long inquiry skills and capacities,” says Ermeling. In addition, he lists key conditions for successful teamwork:

- Stable settings – Wooden needed his sacred planning time and teacher teams need regularly scheduled times when everyone is there.
- Trained facilitators – Every once in a while there's a gifted leader on tap, but more often, facilitators need explicit training.
- Tested protocols – The team needs to focus on the four essential features of inquiry: identify problems, prepare and implement plans, use evidence for reflection, and persistently work toward detectable improvements.

Wooden believed that “when you are through learning, you are through... When you improve a little each day, eventually big things occur... Not tomorrow, not the next day, but eventually a big gain is made. Don't look for the big, quick improvement. Seek the small improvements one day at a time. That's the only way it happens – and when it happens it lasts.”

“Improving Teaching Through Continuous Learning: The Inquiry Process John Wooden Used to Become Coach of the Century” by Bradley Alan Ermeling in *Quest*, Aug. 23, 2012