Applying the Methods of Physics to Education Research

By

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Date: 18 January 2013, Friday
Time: 3.00pm to 4.00pm
Venue: Hilbert Space (SPMS-PAP-02-02)
Host: Dr. Ho Shen Yong

Abstract

Over the past couple of decades, some physicists have applied the methods of physics research to the problem of determining what works and what does not work in educating their students. This has led to a whole field of research called Physics Education Research (PER), and the results have led to a worldwide movement of implementing “research-based pedagogy.” In this discussion, we will investigate Physics Education Research and how the results are implemented. We will also explore the “wrong” ideas and conceptual misunderstandings of our students. Finally, we will consider the fact that some colleagues, although aware of the research, have not implemented the results in their own classrooms.

Short Biography

David Harrison was the recipient of the Canadian Association of Physicists Gold Medal for “Excellence in Teaching Undergraduate Physics” in 2012. Prior to that, Dr. Harrison won the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations Award for Outstanding Contributions to University Teaching in 1976 and he was given the University of Toronto Dean's Excellence Award six times from 1991 to 2008. David did his graduate studies in Experimental High Energy Physics and was awarded PhD from University of Toronto in 1972. Since then, he has taught undergraduate Physics at University of Toronto at all levels. David was always intrigued by how people learn Physics and devoted his professional life seeking to understand how learning occurs. He has been particularly interested in the challenges of teaching:

- The (1000 student) service course for students in the life sciences, most of whom will be applying to a professional faculty such as Medicine.
- Modern Physics to students in non-science programs. This has involved trying to implement ways to discuss these topics at a meaningful level with absolutely no mathematics.

There has been a revolution in physics teaching in the past 15 years or so, informed by the results of Physics Education Research. David is a passionate advocate of this research-based pedagogy both at University of Toronto and more broadly both in Canada and internationally.

One project involving this reformed teaching was an effort to re-structure the pedagogy of the large (1000 student) first year service course at University of Toronto. This was an immense project involving many people over a period of years, and cost well over one million dollars. David was the lead on this and it has been a huge success.

David has also been involved in the use of computers and multi-media for science teaching for decades. This has included writing almost 100 Flash animations, which have now been translated into Spanish, Portuguese, Greek, Dutch, Hungarian, Polish, Catalan, and Basque. He has also been involved in making the Python programming language an integral part of the undergraduate Physics curriculum at University of Toronto.

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