

## *Where Great Teaching Begins: Reflections on a Book Study*

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Effective professional development, meaning professional development (PD) that changes practices and outcomes in the classroom, has certain characteristics. Research shows that teachers do not learn best in large-group, one-time workshops. Rather, changes in practice have been shown to result from personal interactions in small groups of instructors that mutually respect each other as professionals and who develop as a community of learners over time (see *Professional Development: What Works* by Sally Zepeda, © 2012).

In view of this, the GREAT centers of Texas have over the past few years offered several PD academies and extended workshops, such as Project-Based Learning, or more recently, Integrating Career Awareness, that involve teachers over the course of a semester in not only discussing theories of learning or new methods of engaging students, but also in the application of those theories and methods in the classroom. This approach has been shown to have a much greater impact on classroom instruction than short workshops, and, thus, has the greatest chance of producing improved outcomes for students.

This fall, the Central GREAT Center and the Credential Project cosponsored a group of nine instructors to discuss the book *Where Great Teaching Begins* by Anne Reeves (2011). The group met for a total of ten weeks. The initial meeting was held in a traditional setting, and all subsequent meetings were conducted through online webinars using WebEx conferencing software. In addition, participants were required to interact weekly in online discussion forums: responding to study-guide questions, sharing resources, reviewing archived meetings and turning in assignments through a specially-designed Google site.

What follows are some of the lessons we learned as facilitators of this online book study group.

First, the first face-to-face meeting for this kind of sustained PD is critical. The most challenging aspect of the book study, by far, was getting everyone accustomed to the virtual environment: how to log on, how to control the microphone, the camera, write on the board, record audio, etc. WebEx has multiple platform support and a user friendly interface, but there was still a significant learning curve. In addition, all participants had to be designated as “co-owners” of the Google site. This involved participants spending time learning how to navigate the site, post, manage files. The lesson learned here was to spend more time up front acclimating participants to the technical aspects of the virtual environment in order to decrease frustration later.

Second, the participants should have some input into the book being used. The book was chosen by Central GREAT staff, who read it and found it very exciting; and, indeed, it is an excellent, step-by-step explanation of instructional design, from planning through assessment. However, the book was geared toward the K12 classroom, and some discussion was spent in every meeting talking about what did, and what did not, apply to the adult education classroom. Some participants expressed that they would have preferred to study something more that directly addressed theories or practice of adult education. None the less most reported gaining new insight over the course of the study.

Another lesson learned is that participants should be selected carefully. We started with nine in the face-to-face meeting. One withdrew immediately due to personal scheduling conflicts. Two more continued to read the book, but eventually faded from active participation. The six who remained have completed all readings, postings and assignments successfully. Educators considering participating in this type of PD need to carefully consider the time requirement. Online does not mean **less** time. In fact, it may require more. Potential participants also need to be honest with themselves about their willingness to adopt and adapt to online modalities of instruction. If they go into it believing they will have too many problems with technology, they probably will.

On the other hand, as facilitators, we need to examine our expectations. In hind sight we determined that meeting weekly was too often, and three assignments were too many for busy teachers to handle. We definitely should consider ending several weeks before the end of the semester. Toward the end of the study, participants experienced time management issues as job demands increased, reducing momentum.

The most important lesson, however, is that extended PD in a hybrid (face-to-face, synchronous and asynchronous online environments) works, and works well! Participants indicated that they became more reflective during their lesson planning process and more critical of assumptions about what they were teaching and why, shifting their focus from activities in the classroom to learners' engagement and outcomes. Changes in the lesson plans they submitted were noticeable over time: wording of objectives, activities, relationship to standards, and types of assessment. Teachers were able to share ideas, problems, and solutions they were experiencing in their classrooms. When they had to miss a meeting, some sent their thoughts ahead to the facilitators to be presented to the group during the weekly WebEx sessions and later reviewed the archives to get the feedback from their colleagues.

Finally, many of the participants are using this PD opportunity to begin or continue working on their Adult Education Teacher Credential. Participation in the online book study provided opportunities for reflective practice, which is a critical aspect of earning the Teacher Credential. Providing high-quality, evidence-based and relevant professional development

opportunities encourages educators to be recognized for the professionals they are, and that benefits the field as a whole.

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