

Despite the Star Wars-like technology we work with on college campuses every day, we still have the need for sit-around-the-campfire human interaction. One way to bring this interesting dichotomy together is through a Great College Seminar.

Recent Advances in Retreats: Adapting the Great Teachers Seminar Model to Serve the Entire College

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For more than 30 years the Great Teachers Seminars (GTS) have provided the premiere opportunity for faculty professional development through “well facilitated shop talk.” They have served as the opportunity for college professors to share successes, identify and solve each other’s pedagogical challenges, connect with other faculty and recommit themselves to teaching excellence. In the late 80’s several states, provinces, college districts and individual campuses began to realize that the GTS processes could be adapted to serve other college groups. Soon many variations on the theme developed. They have substantially broadened the impact of these seminars. This chapter will provide a brief history of the Great Teaching Seminars, outline the principles and processes, describe the evolution and adaptations of its service to other college constituencies and use Lansing Community College (LCC) as a very special case study. LCC has held more than 30 “Great” retreats in the past 13 years and has incorporated many of the GTS processes into other campus workshops. It has also pioneered several innovations and elaborations on the basic GTS format, which have made the seminars more effective. These improvements have enhanced the LCC seminars and allowed them to serve as a model for similar retreats throughout North America.

A Brief History of the Great Teachers Seminars

In 1969, David B. Gottshall of the College of DuPage (IL) founded the National Great Teachers Seminar, known more modestly then as the Illinois GTS. It was based on earlier faculty development experiments by Roger H. Garrison. Under Gottshall’s leadership for more than 3 decades, the GTS model has helped thousands of college teachers improve their craft and it has spun off many state, province and national retreats. There is another national seminar in Alberta, Canada each year and several provinces have

sponsored their own Celebrations. Gottshall calls the GTS a “movement because it is not associated with nor does it constitute a corporation or organization of any kind”. Nevertheless, the movement has benefited greatly from its association with several other organizations. The American Association of Community and Junior Colleges (now American Association of Community Colleges) was an early Sponsor. The College of DuPage, Gottshall’s home institution, was a major benefactor and supporter. The National Council of Staff, Program and Organizational Development (NCSPOD) has provided active encouragement and support from its earliest days. The University of Hawaii’s community college system and Leeward College have been major supporters for more than a decade and now host the (Inter)National Great Teachers Seminar.

Specific Purposes

“The specific purposes of the Great Teaching Seminars stated in the many annual announcement fliers have remained basically unchanged since the original Illinois Great Teachers Seminar in 1969 (Gottshall,1998):

To celebrate good teaching; To cause educators to venture beyond the limits of their own specializations and environments in search of transferable ideas and the universals of teaching; To promote an attitude of introspection and self-appraisal; To practice rational analysis of instructional problems and to develop realistic, creative approaches to their solution. To stimulate the exchange of information and ideas by building an expanding network of communication among teachers in higher education.

The Four Premises:

1. In the long run, teachers learn to teach best from one another. Properly facilitated shoptalk can be the highest form of staff development.
2. Creativity in teaching is enhanced by mixing teachers of diverse fields, experience levels and interests. If properly tapped, the collective wisdom, experience and creativity of any group of practicing educators far surpasses that of any individual expert of any stature or fame.
3. The key to success in teaching is simplification (less is more) 4. The focus of the seminar is not on the teaching of specific fields, but rather on the art of teaching and emphasis is on the nature of a great teacher. It is a quest for the Great Teacher, and as in the case of any quest, the questers learn much about themselves.

Distinctive Features

In order to qualify as a Great Teachers Seminar, an event must be based on the purposes and premises stated above and must display the following features:

1. There is no pre-planned agenda. In the case of the GT model, the agenda develops out of the discussion of two brief papers written by the participants before they arrive. These papers feature a teaching innovation of which they are proud and a teaching problem for which they have not yet found a satisfactory solution. The agenda is derived from what the facilitators hear and observe in their small group sessions.

2. There is no pre-planned distributed schedule.

3. There are no hired experts hand. The whole idea is to demonstrate the power of the collective wisdom, experience and creativity of the participants. It is one of the most important concepts that they bring back to their campuses.

4. There is an agreement at the very onset of the seminar that all behavior and discussion will be positive and productive. All agree to share discussion time equitably and be graciously honest and straightforward.

5. There is a significant amount of “free” time. The amount and timing of free time is important and variable. It is provided to allow for further discussion, informal follow-up and private reflection. The mind must unboggle from time to time. Some of the best learning and realization occurs during the unscheduled times, during recreation and excursions.”

Processes

No matter if the seminar is planned for faculty or for the entire college, the basics principles are implemented in the same way. There isn't a formal training program for this oral-tradition culture. New leaders learn the trade through working with/apprenticing to experienced seminar directors. Along with the distinctive features of Great seminars that were mentioned in the preceding section there are other features of notable importance:

The Setting: Retreats are best held at centers where we take care of “creature comforts” including good food, peaceful environment and comfortable accommodations.

Staff: Most seminars involve three staff roles: a Director, ideally from outside the institution, who objectively leads the large group sessions and directs the retreat; a Coordinator who works with the local host and deals with the logistics of the seminar; and enough Small Group Facilitators from within the institution to lead groups of 6-8 participants. These facilitators can also be instrumental in keeping the conversations going once the participants return to campus.

Participants: Heterogeneity is important; participants don't know what is impossible in other disciplines. What binds them together is their love of teaching. The larger statewide seminars may have 50-60 participants; 20-30 is more typical of local retreats.

Welcome/Overview: Seminars begin with a welcome, some idea of what is to follow, an orientation to the retreat setting and a brief history of the "Great" Seminar movement. **Introductions:** It is crucial for participants to get to know one another. This can take many forms but it is crucial that participants learn something about who each colleague is, not just what they do.

Books: Participants are invited to bring books to the seminar that have had an important personal or professional impact. When they introduce a book it adds to their self-introduction and the books become part of an informal lending library.

First Day: Participants are often asked to share one thing they do on their first day of class. It's a good and easy activity to get some good ideas to use back home; it also serves as a good example of other tips that will follow.

Small Groups: Participants are assigned to groups of 6-8 for their discussions. During these sessions the small group facilitators listen closely for topics of strong interest to the group. Participants usually have about 10 minutes to summarize their paper and respond to questions.

Topic Selection-Staff: After small group sessions, which discuss the successes and later the challenges, the seminar staff convenes to identify the topics that appear to be of most interest to the participants. Multiple papers on the same topic, subjects of interest to more than one group, issues that a group asks to be considered are all good clues to good choices.

Topic Selection-Participants: At the next large group meeting, the teachers are presented with the list of topics identified by staff as possible issues to discuss. After some annotations and the opportunity to suggest additional topics, the participants are asked to vote for the ones they are most interested in. Their vote determines the breakout sessions that follow.

Topic Sessions: These sessions are arranged during a brief break after the vote. There are usually enough selected topics to keep the groups to an appropriate size. But that is not guaranteed. Participants are not assigned to these discussion groups; they vote with their feet and go to the one that they are most interested in. These single topics sessions often result in recommendations and or conclusions that are shared later.

Other Large Group Activities: These vary substantially by director, perceived needs of the group, and length of the session and may include:

Non-Astounding Teaching Devices:(NATD's) often called tips and tricks. These allow participants to share other effective teaching techniques and/or systems for dealing with the administrivia of faculty life.

Important Teachers: An opportunity for each participant to describe the characteristics of a former teacher who had an impact on their lives.

Advice to a New Teacher: Sharing what you'd tell a new colleague often, of course, identifies good advice for "used" teachers as well.

Books Revisited: An opportunity for folks to read an important paragraph or a sentence that provides the essence of their book.

Commencement: Isn't it wonderful to be in a business where we call our Endings, "commencement?" The final sessions typically include: presentations from the groups completing the search for the great teacher, discussions of follow-up implementation activities that will be done back on campus and acknowledgements of all the people, particularly the staff, who have contributed so much to the seminar.

Benedictions: from all participants allows an opportunity for each person to help bring closure to the seminar though a brief wrap-up statement.

Certificates or diplomas are often presented sometimes accompanied by gentle group humming of Pomp and Circumstance!

Evaluations are often completed to provide feedback in this age of accountability and continuous improvement.

Evolutions

For the first 15 years, this model was used only for teaching celebrations. After all, they were called Great Teaching Seminars and there were clear rules that nobody else need show up. But in the mid 80's, in California, there was a strong move toward shared governance and participatory leadership. David Gottshall was invited to lead some seminars, which used the same format but brought together administrators and faculty to discuss college-wide and state-wide issues. These Educational Leadership Colloquia, sponsored by the Statewide Academic Senate, and the Chief Instructional Office opened the door to a wonderfully rich set of variations on the GTS theme. Many of these were chronicled in "Sons and Daughters of Great Teaching Seminars" (McHargue, 1994) and "In Search of Great Retreats" Bill Searle (1996). They have included:

Single Disciplines Retreats. For example, where all English professors or all Allied Health Instructors are invited to gather. The good news for these is that they share a common language and can use some insider lingo. But they also know what's "impossible" in their field, bring some local 'baggage' to the seminar and may not be able to ask the naïve questions an outsider might. Others have arranged a dialogue between counseling/student services faculty and an equal number of classroom instructors.

Great Administrators Seminars. It took a while to get these off the ground, perhaps because administrators falsely thought the nature of their work did not lend itself to discussions like those that take place at a teacher's seminar. Or may it be because of the unfortunate acronym they produce. The early versions often figured another title to avoid having a GAS! But they did persist although in nowhere near the numbers of teaching celebrations or even the next category;

Great Support Staff Seminars. It turns out that these have worked well and the topics that emerge are quite similar to those that the administrators come up with; college-wide issues and how to improve the institution and the lives of its staff. These have continued to be popular events.

Great College Seminars In the early 90's, soon after the support staff and administrators began their Retreats, some colleges began holding seminars where the "whole family" was invited to participate. Administrators, faculty and support staff met to discuss college-wide issues, to celebrate, elaborate on what's working and to identify issues that need attention. These have turned out to be the most popular, most frequently held seminars other than the teaching celebrations. And they may be the most valuable. It is an opportunity for faculty to see a broader cross-section of college issues. The administrative leaders present are often decision-makers with deeper pockets and can make some of the seminar recommendations happen. Support staff have the opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to the institution in new ways. While these retreats may not be as celebratory as the teaching retreats,

they certainly result in more institutional change; the faculty retreats result in more individual teaching innovations.

Special Touches

Lansing Community College, with the encouragement of long-time seminar director, Mike McHargue, from Foothill College in California, finally offered an all-college seminar after about 10 years into the “Great” seminar business. The opportunity was offered to administrators, faculty and support staff of course, but an additional group was invited as well, and it was one of the best things that could have happened; students were invited. These students not only worked on campus but also had an interest pursuing a career in education. The student’s presence provided fresh perspective, lots of energy and resulted in a great deal of authenticity during the discussions. The LCC seminars begin with a send-off breakfast hosted and attended by the President and the Deans. This serves as a most convincing show of support to the seminar participants that these retreats are indeed important college events. All participants travel together for the one hour ride to the retreat center in a chartered bus providing an opportunity to get to know one another and a chance to review each others’ success and challenge papers that they were asked to write in preparation for the seminar. The bus ride helps the “campers” to get in the right frame of mind for the seminar by allowing them a chance to relax, to get into group mode, and to begin conversations with people aboard. An emergency vehicle is on hand at the retreat site however and has typically been used for emergency runs to the supermarket for those important round-the-camp-fire supplies that may have been forgotten! Those aforementioned campfires have become a huge part of the LCC all-college seminars. Considered free time, it is around these fires in the evenings that the groups truly get to know one another and come to appreciate each other for the unique attributes each brings to the organization. The conversations are as intense as any other time throughout the formal sessions but have a more playful tone. S’mores, food of choice at Michigan campfires, deliciously help seal the memories made during these evening sessions!

“Mailboxes”, manila mailing envelopes, affixed to a large wall space is another important feature of LCC’s seminars and serve as another means for participants to communicate with one another. These short, supportive and often times admiring notes have report ably been reviewed many times after the seminar is over on those days at work that aren’t quite as great as those days at the seminar! About two months after the seminar is over all participants are invited back for a luncheon reunion, to receive their commemorative sweatshirt (often of their own design) and to celebrate together any changes and success they have helped make happen since their return to campus. During this happy event, the alumni have an opportunity to write a personal note to their colleagues encouraging them to attend the next scheduled “Great” seminar. A personal endorsement from a colleague is always the best method of recruitment for anything.

The cross-divisional alliances that are built in these 2½ day seminars are impossible to duplicate in any other college activity. All for the expense of approximately \$360.00/per person! LCC is not aware of any other professional development activity that is both so cost effective and personally and professionally meaningful.

One colleague had this to say about the experience:

"I don't know how this is possible, but in 2 1/2 days, 25 strangers became my friends--people I feel I've come to know quite well and care about a great deal. The facilitators were great and skilled at keeping everyone on task and on time. We all had equal time to speak. There was no "us and them" at this seminar only we, heart, and understanding! This is the best that LCC has to offer. This opportunity should never, ever be discontinued, or missed. This has richly reminded me why I work at LCC. I leave feeling proud to be part of the LCC family. Thank you for this gift".

Noble Failures

We've made some mistakes and found some areas where this model does not work. In the early 90's, the California Statewide Academic Senate tried to use it to train new local Academic Senate leaders; we also tried to use it to train new Support Staff leaders. Neither of these worked well because the participants were too inexperienced with their new roles. They weren't able to fulfill the participants are the experts" requirement. When a retreat is based on a kind of "train the newbies" event, this is not the model to use. On the other hand, it works very well for a new faculty retreat because most "new" faculty are not brand-new; they were teaching assistants in graduate school, most have years of experience as adjunct faculty, and some have transferred from full-time positions at other colleges.

Summary

The Great Seminar model has aged gracefully in the past 30 years. While many elaborations have been added to the basic formula, the original format has endured. It turns out that the process is very adaptable as long as the basic principles are followed. While we wouldn't recommend either, these seminars have served more than 100 participants and less than 10. The standard state or regional retreat lasts 5 days but the most typical ones these days are 2 or 3 days.. One day retreats have also been done with good results.

Time and experience has been kind to the “Great” seminars and has enabled them to spawn some outstanding progeny. Using the Staff Developer “C.A.S.E.” method (Copy And Steal Everything) they have spun off many elegant retreats, which have served other college subsets and many all-college groups. The classic formula can be folded, spindled even mutilated and it works as long as the basic principles are honored. And many of the seminar activities can be and are used in other college meetings: classes, committee meetings, and senates.

It is not surprising that these retreats always work. As part of her doctoral work at the University of Texas, Austin, Cindra Smith (1999) analyzed their success and found that they incorporate the important educational principles noted in works on Adult Learning (Cross 1981), Good Practice (Chickering et al, 1989) and Learning Organizations (Senge, 1990). The remarkable thing is that these principles were part of the “Great” retreats many years before they became part of our professional literature. .

While the self-developed modifier “Great” may have seemed a bit over-the-top 30 years ago it has held up and worn well. The “Great” format has been a premier community college professional development staple for all of those years. It shows no sign of slowing down. In fact, the trend continues to be upwards. Sounds “great” to us!

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