



PLANNING A LOCAL GREAT TEACHERS SEMINAR

Great Teachers seminars are held at the national, state, provincial, regional and local levels. They foster teaching skills, community, renewal, creativity, problem solving, and planning. The format has been used successfully as a professional development activity for teaching, counseling, administration, leadership, support staff, diversity, specific disciplines, administrator/faculty collaboration, and across the college spectrum as “great college” seminar.

This document has been prepared as a resource for colleges and districts that are planning local and regional seminars using the "great teachers" model. Since the model and format are experiential and developmental in nature, we strongly recommend that local colleges use or rely on experienced seminar directors and coordinators in developing the seminars.

SEMINAR HISTORY

The seminar approach is based on 40 years of development, beginning with the founding of the Illinois Great Teachers Seminar in 1970 by David Gottshall. Gottshall has remained active in the movement and currently directs numerous state and provincial seminars in the US and Canada, as well as many regional seminars. It has been a prototype for state and provincial seminars in across North America as well as over hundreds of local and regional seminars sponsored by local colleges. Many seminars have been held annually for 25 years or more, including California, Canadian Rocky Mountain Seminar, Hawaii, North Carolina, Pacific Northwest, and Nova Scotia.

The "great teachers" format continually evolves as the participants, staff members and directors continually review and evaluate the seminars. However, there are some aspects of the format that are basic to the seminar and are described below. Without them, a seminar would not be considered to use the "great teachers" model.

SEMINAR PHILOSOPHY

The philosophy of the seminars guides their development and is responsible for their continuing success. The seminars are based on the assumption that the participants have the collective expertise necessary to teach and learn from each other. No outside experts are brought in to speak. The structure for the seminar allows participants to determine the content of seminar discussions. The topics for the seminar are not predetermined but evolve from participants' discussions of individual innovations or successes or problems. The participants' various disciplines and backgrounds are considered assets to fostering creativity and diverse ways of viewing issues.

The seminar emphasizes accomplishments and problem solving. A positive and productive seminar culture is established through recognizing and stating that positive and productive behavior is expected; complaining is actively discouraged. The approach builds on people's motivation to succeed, to be productive, and to be empowered to have a positive effect on their students and their institutions.

A simple design and concentration on a few important concepts are major philosophical guidelines. Adopting the tenet of “less is more” results in an experience in which participants explore and reflect on a few important ideas in depth. The seminar has a rigid, yet minimal structure of large group sessions, small group discussions, and relaxation. The schedule is designed to provide a balanced rhythm of small group interaction, large group listening and presentations, and breaks for reflection and play

Brief papers related to the theme are prepared in advance of the seminar, one on a success or innovation and one on a problem. All participants share their papers in small groups, starting with the success paper in one group and the problem in a subsequent group. Possible topics for in-depth discussions are identified from the success and problem paper discussions and participants vote on which topics they would like to include on the agenda.

At many seminars, participants are asked to bring a "trick of the trade," a non-astounding teaching or other device that helps them be more effective or efficient in their job. These are briefly demonstrated in large group sessions. Participants may also be invited to bring a copy of a book which has influenced them in their profession, and they may be invited to read a paragraph or two. Other activities which may take place depend on the focus of the seminar and the time available. In all cases the activities are determined by the seminar staff based on its reading of the interests and expertise of those in attendance.

The seminars are held as a break from normal schedules and expectations. The most productive seminars take place away from campus and are at least 2 1/2 days*. It is important that the participants have a chance to eat, relax, and socialize together in addition to the time spent in seminar sessions. Good food and a "retreat-like" location also contribute to the seminar success.

SEMINAR STAFF

There are three important roles involved in a great teachers seminar:

Coordinator(s) or organizer(s): A person at the sponsoring college would most likely assume the coordinator or organizer role, arranging for the site and meals, disseminating information about the seminar, registering participants, and coordinating logistics.

Director or lead facilitator: This person directs the seminar and would have significant experience as staff at other great teachers seminars, preferably working periodically with David Gottshall, the founder of the great teachers movement, for additional training and review. The director leads all seminar activities, conducts training sessions and staff meetings, and works with the coordinator to develop the seminar announcements and materials.

Group facilitators: Each small group (ideally 6-8 members) has a facilitator. Facilitators need to be skilled in listening, identifying issues, conducting group discussions, and recognizing group dynamics. While experience as a participant in a great teachers seminar is not a prerequisite, it can be very helpful. A training session for the facilitators should be arranged prior to the seminar.

Please contact the people listed at the end of this document for suggestions for skilled seminar directors. Facilitators may be selected from the sponsoring colleges.

PLANNING OUTLINE

- The format can successfully be used with any topic in which all participants have a stake and have some experience.
- The format is designed to fulfill the following purposes:
 - to practice rational analysis of educational problems and to find realistic, creative approaches to their solution

* Shorter workshops (a day or half-day) that involve sharing innovations and solving problems are excellent faculty development, although they don't have the same impact as a seminar.

- To cause participants to venture beyond the limits of their own specializations and environments in search of transferable and universal ideas
 - To stimulate the exchange of information and ideas by building a network
 - To promote an attitude of introspection and self-appraisal by providing a relaxed setting and open, humane climate
 - To celebrate and renew the commitment to education
- Planning for the event includes the following:
- The seminar should ideally run at least 2 and 1/2 days.*
 - Select a good environment with good food, away from campus
 - Carefully select an experienced director for the seminar
 - Select seminar facilitators who are good listeners and are committed to supporting the growth and learning of others (evaluations indicate that skills of the director and facilitators are essential to the success of the seminar).
 - Have enough facilitators so that the small group sessions have 6-8 people each.
 - Provide a staff orientation; work together as a consensus-based team prior to the seminar to plan the event.
 - Depend on the expertise of those attending the seminar – do not invite any outside speakers as “experts.”
 - Craft the seminar schedule to allow for plenty of time for thought, networking, and play.
- While there is no standard outline, "recipe" or checklist for the seminar, the following are essential aspects of the great teachers format:
- Participant introductions at the start of the seminar emphasize who they are rather than what they do.
 - Participants prepare two brief papers prior to the seminar, one on a success or innovation, and one on a problem.
 - Copies of participant papers are provided to everyone at some point in the seminar.
 - Participants discuss their papers in at least two small group sessions: the first session is devoted to the successes or innovations, followed by a session on the problem papers with a different small group.
 - Topics for the agenda are identified from the issues raised in the success and problem discussion sessions, and popularity votes by the entire group determines which topics are addressed.
 - Guidelines for the seminar are introduced early in the process:
 - > equal time for all
 - > no whining, griping or “war” stories
 - > mutually enforce the above
 - The schedule and activities are adjusted as needed based on the needs of the participants.
 - The staff meets frequently, particularly at the beginning of the seminar, to assess the process and identify the topics to be voted on for further discussion.

* Shorter workshops (a day or half-day) that involve sharing innovations and solving problems are excellent faculty development, even though they can't have the same impact as a longer seminar.

SEQUENCE

The seminar schedule is adjusted to the needs of the participants and length of the seminar. However, an order of seminar sessions might be:

- Brief overview of seminar philosophy
- Participant introductions
- Overview of ground rules for discussions
- Small group discussions of successes or innovations
- Small group discussions of problems or challenges
- Large group activity
- Small group discussions on topics identified in prior discussions
- Large group activity
- Closing

Regular breaks for meals, reflection and recreation would also be scheduled.

SEMINAR OUTCOMES

The following outcomes have been reported in evaluation letters and from follow-up surveys throughout the years. In all types of seminars, participants report:

- Openness, sharing, increased self-awareness
- Affirmation of current good practice
- Increased willingness and ability to problem solve
- Increased self-confidence
- Renewal and revitalization
- Increased willingness to take a risk
- Increased openness and recommitment to students and the educational process
- Less of a feeling of being "stuck" and increased optimism
- Increased respect for and trust in their colleagues
- Increased awareness of a wide variety of ideas and strategies
- Increased contacts with others in the college and across the state or province (depending on the nature of the seminar)
- Increased leadership roles and assuming new job responsibilities
- Implementation of one or more of the ideas they learned at the seminar

Teachers report, in addition to the above:

- Increased contacts with students in their classes
- Increased contacts with faculty both in and out of their disciplines
- Increased reading in professional journals and on teaching strategies

"Great College" seminars tend to foster the following outcomes:

- Increased team feeling and sharing of information
- Increased awareness of other points of view
- Recommitment to the college and increased loyalty and morale
- Revised or new mission and goal statements for the college
- Task forces and working committees are established to continue work on identified topics.

Seminars focused on cultural diversity and/or specific ethnic group concerns have some unique outcomes:

- Validation of experience as a faculty or administrator from an underrepresented group
- Increased networking, mentoring, and support across the state
- Empowerment and appreciation for other ethnicities
- Increased assumption of leadership roles
- Increased visibility and appreciation on campus

Participants in seminars for administrators report:

- Increased job responsibilities or promotions (45% over three years, 20.8% in one year)
- Awareness of different management and leadership strategies
- Greater confidence in handling personnel situations
- Greater awareness of resources available to them

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Resources and more information are posted at <http://ngtm.net> (website of the National Great Teachers Movement.)

Additional Contacts

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Writings

Gottshall, David *The Spirit and Intent of the Great Teachers Seminar*. 1999.

Smith, Cindra J. *The Great Teachers Seminar: Why Does it Work?* 1995.

McHargue, Mike & Bergeron, Pam. *Adapting the Great Teachers Model to Serve the Entire College*, 2003.

This document was prepared by *Cindra Smith, in consultation with David Gottshall and Mike McHargue, Revised 2009.*