

Using the Great Teachers Model for Engineering Technology Faculty Renewal: A Strategy that Works

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Abstract – Faculty renewal in Engineering Technology is a constant challenge. With continuous demands placed upon faculty in the areas of teaching, scholarship, and service, administrators frequently search for ways to keep their colleagues informed. The newly formed School of Technology at Western Carolina University recently engaged in a groundbreaking activity for the institution. A Great Teachers Retreat (GTR) was held for all members of the school. Although there have been many successful adaptations of the original great teacher model, none has particularly dealt with engineering faculties. This paper highlights the history, purpose, premises, format, and processes associated with the Great Teachers model. It specifically addresses its application at the Engineering Technology Great Teachers Retreat (ETGTR) at Western Carolina University. An analysis of the ETGTR application and outcomes is also included.

Keywords: Engineering Technology, faculty development, Great Teachers Retreat

INTRODUCTION

Effective, meaningful, and cost-effective teaching faculty development initiatives are highly valued commodities, particularly in higher education. Recently, driven by a relatively young and dynamic teaching faculty, Western Carolina University utilized a process that originated more than 30 years ago as a grassroots movement among community college teachers. Bergeron and McHargue [1] chronicled many adaptations of the process to states, districts, individual organizations, and single discipline units. The university's School of Technology engaged its entire teaching faculty and staff in this activity in September 2005. That activity broke new ground for both the university and the discipline.

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

“Twenty-five years ago, I wanted to learn how to teach,” said David B. Gottshall. From that simple and profound desire, Mr. Gottshall, founder of the Great Teachers Seminars, started a movement that resulted in hundreds of seminars for faculty, staff, and organizational development, with thousands of participants throughout the United States and Canada [2]. In 1969, Gottshall, then a faculty member with the College of DuPage in Chicago, Illinois, founded the National Great Teachers Seminar, originally known as the Illinois Great Teachers Seminar. The first seminar was based on earlier staff development experiments by the late Roger H. Garrison. Mr. Garrison was instrumental in the formation and development of the community college concept and was involved in congressional committee meetings that were originally held to explore the concept of community college education. As an

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inexperienced instructor in the newly formed community college environment, Gottshall was not formally trained to teach at that level. He was provided a text, a class roll, and a listing of students who registered for his classes. Unfortunately, that process is still common today in college and university classrooms. Although our educational systems award degrees in education and provide teacher training, few actually provide instruction in the art of teaching. It is a known fact that teaching is comprised of the science of methodology and the art of application and delivery. Gottshall was well aware of this situation, so with his self-perceived lack of effective instructional methodologies and strategies, he decided to assemble a group of teachers with similar needs. He felt they could begin to learn how to teach from each other in small groups and minimally structured settings. That established the first Great Teachers Seminar. It is interesting that Gottshall was particularly fascinated with the art of teaching. He thought that, although difficult to define, educators who attempted to identify the nature of the “great teacher” could indeed prompt great teaching in their own classrooms.

PURPOSES AND PREMISES OF THE GREAT TEACHERS MOVEMENT

The Great Teachers model has been employed in many states and provinces throughout North America, Canada, and (most recently) Japan. The original National Great Teachers Seminar was discontinued after 25 continuous, successful years. However, the University of Hawaii now hosts the official nationwide event.

The purposes of the Great Teachers Seminars are relatively unchanged since the initial Illinois Great Teachers Seminar in 1969. According to Gottshall [3], those purposes are to:

- celebrate good teaching.
- cause educators to venture beyond the limits of their own specializations and environments in search of transferable ideas and the universals of teaching.
- promote an attitude of introspection and self-appraisal by providing a relaxed setting and straightforward process whereby participants can seriously review and contemplate their attitude, methods, and behavior as teachers.
- practice rational analysis of instructional problems and develop realistic, creative approaches to their solution.
- stimulate the exchange of information and ideas by building an expanding network of communication among teachers in higher education.

Additionally, all Great Teachers Seminars are based on four premises:

- In the long run, teachers learn to teach best from one another. Properly facilitated shoptalk can be the highest form of staff development.
- Creativity in teaching is enhanced by co-mingling 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.
- The key to success in teaching is simplification (less is more).

As the statewide and province-wide Great Teachers Seminars developed, the process was advanced by participants who became passionate about its use and value. That process persists because of the initiative and selfless ambition of people who want to share their experience with teachers in their own geographic area and institutions. Once the Great Teachers concept is implemented at the local level, it becomes a model for a variety of grass roots staff and organizational development activities that are effectual and cost-effective. The concept is transmitted orally in order to prevent the development of any fixed procedure that might be formally adopted, which could cause disenchantment of the education professional [3].

PROCEDURE AND PROCESSES

Regardless of the particular application, the procedures for a successful retreat are similar. As Gottshall states in each *Great Seminar* he conducts, there is no pre-planned agenda, no pre-set schedule, and no so-called “experts” to impart knowledge [5]. Before attendees arrive at the retreat setting, they are asked to bring several important artifacts. Based upon the North Carolina Great Teachers Retreat participant information sheet [6], participants are asked to bring:

- Copies of a brief, one-page paper describing a personally attempted “Teaching Innovation,” successful or unsuccessful. The paragraph may include a brief description of the instructional need or circumstances that generated the innovation, and its success or failure.
- Copies of a brief, one-page paper describing a Problem in Teaching for which a satisfactory answer or solution has not been found. This paper may analyze the problem or merely pose a question for discussion.
- A Non-Astounding Teaching Device (NATD), homemade or commercial, subject-oriented or universally applicable, which has enhanced the participant’s teaching effectiveness.
- One copy of a book relating to teaching which the participant has found personally or professionally helpful or inspiring. This book becomes part of a “Browsing Library” at the retreat.
- A three-ring notebook for the participant’s papers after small group presentations.
- Optional items, which can include comfortable clothing, walking shoes, alarm clock, and camera.

Seminars can be held at any location, but mostly they are held at conference centers or retreat locations where good food, comfortable accommodations, and outdoor activities are prevalent. Most seminars involve 25-30 participants, but can accommodate as many as 60-100. A well-qualified and experienced staff is imperative to the success of the retreat. The staff traditionally consists of a director (who is responsible for leading large group sessions and guiding the seminar process), a coordinator (responsible for managing the logistics of the retreat), and a group of facilitators responsible for “listening” in small group discussions. Each small group normally consists of seven to nine participants. Time for leisurely activities must be included in the retreat schedule.

Once the participants have arrived and are registered at the retreat setting, the seminar director conducts a welcome and orientation session, which normally lasts two hours. During the orientation session, participants are given a brief history of the Great Teachers concept, given an overview the process, and introduced to other participants through specific icebreaker exercises. During the orientation session, participants are reminded of Gottshall’s simple ground rules that are to be observed throughout the retreat.

- No griping or whining;
- No telling of “war” stories;
- Allow equal time for all participants to share their ideas and experiences;
- All behavior will be positive and productive [5].

The next two sessions involve the presentation and discussion of the “innovation paper” and the “problem paper.” Participants are assembled in groups of seven to nine members, and are assigned a facilitator. In each session, each participant is given the opportunity to present his/her problem or innovation. Each member of the group is invited to respond with a comment or suggestion. During the presentations, facilitators carefully listen for topics of interest. The facilitator’s role as listener is critical to the creation of a meaningful seminar agenda. The participants’ responses are vital to the innovations and problems presented in the small groups, and they drive agenda development. After the presentation sessions, the staff convenes to identify the topics that have been mentioned in more than one group and might stimulate further discussion. The staff assembles a listing of topics to be presented

to the participants for a vote to determine the seminar agenda. The participants vote (in a large group meeting) on which sessions they would like to attend. The seminar agenda formed by the group's vote is finalized, and breakout sessions are arranged and offered for the group to attend at its choosing.

Additional sessions and activities depend on the individual personality of each group, and vary according to the director. Sessions can include:

- Non-Astounding Teaching Devices (NATDs) – This session allows each participant to share a teaching tip or trick-of-the-trade that he/she has found helpful.
- Book Reflections – This session allows participants to read selections from the book they brought for the browsing library.
- Favorite Teacher – This session allows each participant to share qualities of his/her “favorite” teacher.
- Advice to the New Teacher – This session can be either an individual discussion or a panel discussion on words of advice to the beginning teacher.
- Sorting – A short exercise to identify similarities and differences in participants. It is structured so the participant can use the information in his/her own classroom in selected situations.

Seminars usually conclude with presentations on the quest for the “great teacher.” Sessions can include follow-up information and applications for information gained at the retreat. Certificates are prepared and presented to attendees. Usually, the participants complete short, non-scientific evaluations.

THE ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGY GREAT TEACHERS RETREAT

Faculties in Engineering Technology are faced with increasing demands on their time in the areas of teaching, scholarship, and service. It is becoming increasingly difficult for administrators to lead their faculties in each of those areas. It is no different at Western Carolina University. Faculty members are expected to address “quality and effectiveness of teaching, professional development, contributions to institutional affairs, and promise for sustained future development and scholarly employment” each year in their “Tenure, Promotion, and Reappointment” document [4]. Although it is unwritten, WCU’s status as a regional university dictates that faculty members spend 50% of their time on teaching, 25% on scholarship, and 25% on engagement with industry. Although teaching occupies most of our time, many members of the faculty at Western Carolina University are relatively young and inexperienced in the classroom. Only three of the 27 full-time professors in the School of Technology are tenured. That fact, in conjunction with the departmental goal of teaching excellence, led administrators to search for appropriate methods of faculty development.

There have been many successful adaptations of the original Great Teachers model. All of those surround Gottshall’s original purpose of “rigid minimal structure.” Rigid minimal structure assures that there is a dependable and identifiable set of practices in place for a retreat. It also assures that each retreat will be unique because of the particular combination of people, values, and expertise represented. The quintessential element of all *Great Seminars* is not discipline specific, but an intense focus on the art of teaching.

The success of the National Great Teachers model is evidenced by Gottshall’s motto of “less is more.” Notably, there is no head office or national director, no telephone, how-to manuals, dues, or handbooks. Most important, since there is no ownership, there are no egos or power struggles. The success of the Great Teachers model is based on the celebration of great teaching by great teachers. Therefore, it was decided that a Great Teachers Retreat would be the best fit for Western Carolina University’s Engineering Technology faculty development, and would be beneficial to both experienced and inexperienced faculty members in the School of Technology.

Once the retreat was planned and funding was secured, the initial Western Carolina University Great Teachers Retreat (WCUGTR) was held September 25– 27, 2005, at the Kanuga Conference Center near Hendersonville, North Carolina. David Gottshall, founder of the Great Teachers Movement, was the retreat director. Additional staff

included a retreat coordinator and three facilitators. Twenty-three of the twenty-seven full-time faculty members of the School of Technology participated. Job titles included Professor, Associate Professor, Assistant Professor, Visiting Professor, Program Director, Coordinator, and Associate Dean. As is characteristic of many *Great Seminar* events, there was significant diversity of interest and job specialization within the group.

Due to time constraints, a two-day format was selected (as opposed to the normal three to five day format). The retreat was opened on a Sunday evening with an introduction that included retreat history, purpose, and philosophy. The participants then participated in an icebreaker exercise that avoided mention of work-related information. Monday morning was devoted to small group discussions of the innovation papers prepared by participants. Monday afternoon was focused on discussions of the educational problems and problem solving. That afternoon was an opportunity for participants to individualize the retreat: some reviewed their notes and reflected on their learning, while others gathered in special interest sessions. Since the retreat was less than a two-day event, the normal amount of free time afforded participants was somewhat reduced, but was still included as an important component of the *Great Seminar* process.

The “tricks-of-the-trade” were presented in a large group session on Monday evening. During that time, participants were allowed to share ideas that enhanced their teaching methodologies. Afterwards, participants enjoyed several educational activities, followed by a social event structured to induce casual conversation. This proved to be a meaningful and productive time.

During the small group discussions on Monday, the retreat staff identified topics of significant interest to participants. On Tuesday morning, participants reviewed the listing of topics outlined by the retreat staff and director, and voted on topics that evinced further discussion. Their selections included:

- Teaching Thinking Skills
- Evaluating Soft Skills and Teamwork
- Evaluating Team Performance
- Teaching to Different Skill Levels
- Online Learning
- Student’s Responsibility in the Learning Process

The retreat was closed Tuesday morning with reflections and recollections on the nature of “The Great Teacher.” These reflections turned out to be profound representations of the art and spirit of teaching. The final closing circle gave each person an opportunity to express what he or she was taking home from the retreat. In addition to the structured retreat activities, participants shared ideas and thoughts during meals and late night discussions.

EVALUATION AND ANALYSIS OF SUCCESS

The immediate return to the “real world” after a retreat can sometimes be a reawakening for participants. Many attendees report feelings of euphoria in the first few days after returning to the classroom. Teachers often enjoy a renewed passion for teaching. Smith [2] describes one of the common problems encountered by participants as their inability to effectively express to others exactly what they experienced at the retreat. Due to the individualized nature of the retreat, participants venture far beyond simply gaining knowledge about teaching. Nakaji [7] described one seminar as “an earthquake whose aftershocks spread themselves throughout all of California carrying an exuberant, boundless, and almost defiant energy and momentum.” While scientific surveys and assessments would somewhat defeat the purpose of the retreat, some feedback can be helpful for the continuous improvement of the process, setting, and staff. In the case of the Western Carolina University School of Technology retreat, a simple feedback form (shown in Appendix 1) was administered the week after participants returned to Cullowhee. Of the 23 faculty members participating in the retreat, 13 (57%) of them returned their feedback forms. Aside from the obvious comments about the great food, relaxed atmosphere, and free time, participants made some interesting comments. In addressing the first open-ended question requesting identification of the three most important

outcomes of the retreat, a common theme emerged. Many of the respondents commented that they had a new outlook and positive perspective on teaching. Others reported that they learned many practical teaching techniques and problem-solving approaches. Still others commented that they had become more “outcomes-based.” A vast majority of Engineering Technology faculty members reported that they felt closer to their colleagues and had developed new friendships.

When asked how the retreat may have impacted their approach to teaching and learning, many respondents mentioned continuous improvement, increased student involvement and responsibility, and a more positive outlook on the mundane aspects of teaching. One respondent even stated that he was considering leaving teaching as a profession, but the retreat renewed his passion and sense of purpose for the art of teaching. Other feedback data are presented in Table 1.

	Excellent	Adequate	Poor
<i>Retreat Direction</i>	85%	15%	
<i>Retreat Coordination</i>	92%	8%	
<i>Retreat Format</i>	77%	27%	
<i>Retreat Facilities</i>	92%	8%	

Table 1: Results from Engineering Technology Feedback/Outcome form

In general, faculty members who have attended Great Teachers retreats report increased self-awareness and openness, enhanced problem solving ability, increased self-confidence, and increased commitment to their students [2]. Western Carolina University’s experiment with the Great Teachers concept was no different. A multitude of positive comments and the results reported above seem to indicate that the retreat was a success, and its goals were accomplished. Dr. Duane D. Dunlap, Associate Dean of the School of Technology, stated: “We have a great team. The Great Teachers Retreat brought us all even closer together, and reinforced my belief that I am blessed to be associated with such great teachers. All of us were challenged to look inside ourselves and find that which makes us great, and then share that with our colleagues. We are an even better team because of the retreat [8].”

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTION

The Great Teachers model has gone through numerous iterations during its 35-year life span, and does not show any sign of fading. Many participants have indicated that the process is truly “life-changing.” Today, the model’s basic purpose, premises, and format remain relatively unchanged. Seminars have been adapted to include universities, community colleges, public schools, and many individual units within those respective institutions. The success of the Great Teachers model is due to its founder, David Gottshall, and to the participation and input of the many participants who have attended during its existence. In many instances, those participants have returned to their respective environments transformed into more innovative and introspective teachers. Those “graduates” perpetuate the movement, and assist it in its continuous quest for the “great teacher.”

As for future “Great” initiatives, Western Carolina University is exploring additional applications for the process in other departments and the entire university. A booklet is being published for distribution to all departments of the university on the benefits of the Great Teachers model and how it may be comprehensively applied at WCU. As the University’s vision for enhanced instructional practices and teaching excellence is further refined, the need for

future *Great Seminar* applications will be required to address many of the practical challenges that university faculty and administrators face in delivering effective classroom instruction to students.

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APPENDIX 1



Participant Feedback/ Outcome Form

Fall 2005

1) Please list the 3 most important outcomes of the retreat for you.

2) How did (or will) the retreat affirm or change the way you approach your work in teaching & learning?

Rate the following by placing a dot in the circle next to your choice: ●

3) Retreat Direction (David Gottshall) Excellent Adequate Poor

4) Retreat Coordination / Staff Excellent Adequate Poor

5) Retreat Format Excellent Adequate Poor

6) Retreat Facilities (Kanuga) Excellent Adequate Poor

Explain Your Ratings / Other Comments? (use back if needed)