



Online Book Studies As Effective Professional Development

The Schultz Center is continually looking for ways to limit the amount of time necessary for taking teachers out of classrooms to allow them to participate in opportunities for professional development. At the same time, new approaches considered for regular inclusion in Schultz Center offerings must meet certain requirements for high quality professional development:

- ◆ It is connected to educators' goals and interests.
- ◆ It has the potential to engage colleagues in collaborative learning.
- ◆ It is carried out over an extended period of time; and
- ◆ It deepens teachers' understanding of content knowledge and pedagogy.

Can book studies be described as a form of high quality professional development? How do we distinguish an informal book study group from one that would meet the conditions of high quality professional development, and meet them in such a way that the Schultz Center can offer them as a viable means of accomplishing professional learning for the completion of goals identified for individual teachers in their Individualized Professional Development Plans? Professional book studies engage educators in critical reading, intentional dialogue, and job-embedded learning with the purpose of enhancing teaching and students' learning.¹ Professional book studies are an opportunity for educators to engage in professional discourse around a specific topic of teaching and learning. In order to do this, individuals committed to reading and discussing a book are guided by the following question: "How will this book influence professional practices at both the classroom and school levels?"²

Would it be possible to carry out a professional book study, meeting the characteristics described above, while using an online environment in which to carry out the discourse? This was the challenge explored by two teacher leaders – Maxine Bergman and Angela Wolfe, who worked with the Schultz Center to pilot an online experience with professional book study, as a means of accomplishing creditable professional development. To formalize the experience into a relevant and valuable professional learning experience, the book study was organized for management and facilitation through Blackboard as the primary communications vehicle. Blackboard was used as the means by which instructors communicated regularly with class members and posted resources and assignments in response to book content. It was also used as the communication tool for instructors to review and respond to the quality of content shared by students.

What We Learned From The Pilot

The online book study was conducted on the book *Teach Like Your Hair's on Fire!* by Rafe Esquith, which was used as the pilot during the summer of 2008, and the school year 2008-2009. By the end of the school year, a total of sixty-seven teachers had participated during the summer or school year sessions of the book study. In addition to the regular forms of dialogue carried out with participants by the instructor and facilitators, a survey of participants was conducted to get feedback on certain aspects of the book studies approach. At that time, nineteen (19) participants responded to the survey, and although this number of respondents was low, the data was useful for formative purposes. The feedback collected was used to determine reactions of participants to this delivery vehicle, and to make decisions about the feasibility of this approach as a means for accomplishing the requirements cited earlier for high quality professional development. The content of the survey was based on items provided by the book study facilitators, and from a survey developed by Robert Marzano³ in conjunction with a book study he used with teachers as they read *Classroom Instruction That Works* (2001). The content of this survey dealt with the quality and content of the book study, and the extent to which participants used strategies learned and discussed in the book study in their classrooms. All phases of the course received positive responses from a majority of the participants. The group activities and discussion threads provided appropriate practice and feedback according to eighteen (95%) of the teachers. The size of their book study group was just right for receiving feedback and collaborating with others online according to (79%) of the respondents. Taking into account the small number of respondents in the survey, the majority of participants gave a clear indication that the size of the group was conducive to a satisfactory group experience. Almost two-thirds (63%) of the participants thought group members showed a high level of participation in group discussions and postings on Blackboard, and over three-fourths (79%) were satisfied with the depth and pacing of content in the book study. Just over half (58%) of participants reported

¹ *Professional Book Studies: What they are and why they matter*. St. Mary's University of Minnesota. (2008). Retrieved from <http://www.pdi.smumn.edu>.

² Donohue, Z., Van Tassel, M. & Patterson, L. (1996). *Research in classroom talks, texts, and inquiry*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

³ Marzano, R., Pickering, D., and Pollock, J. *Classroom Instruction that Works*. (2001). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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using the completion of this book study as a developmental goal in their Individual Personal Development Plans (IPDP). Other general comments received about the online experience itself included:

- 📌 positive responses to the interactions with peers online as part of the study (3),
- 📌 positive reports about the support provided by both facilitators with direct emails and responses to postings through Blackboard (4), and
- 📌 the advantage of being able to complete the course at their own pace.

The pilot study, while small, reflected generally positive reactions to the program. Most of the participants felt that resources and materials from the study would be relevant in their classroom environments. Teachers also felt positively about participating in a future online book study, and indicated their intent to do so. Feedback from teachers about the use of what was learned from the book study in their own classrooms was mixed. Most teachers responding to the survey indicated that they had attempted to incorporate to some extent what they learned in the book study with their own practices. However, since this study reflected a small group of teachers' feelings and usage of the subject matter for only one text, it is possible that different texts would provide teachers with additional opportunities and information that could be used in the classroom as well.

Future book studies may provide more information about the impact of the text on the teacher and the ability to transition the written information into classroom practice. It may also be beneficial to have participants provide more *follow-up* to look at the impact of the book study, or to have online book instructors or facilitators complete separate tasks or activities as part of their responsibilities for the course. A period of weeks following completion of the training would provide a more reasonable timeframe in which to provide follow-up as a part of the planned professional development, and to check for the transfer of learning or follow-through in the use of new practices taught as part of the online study. A variety of methods could be used to evaluate the experience of teachers as a result of this online book study experience, and to see whether there is any lasting impact on them or their practice. Only a few teachers cited feedback about direct impact on students, but where it was, the results indicated a positive effect on overall achievement.

Plans For Book Studies In The Future

It is important that any future book studies are planned carefully to address the goals of participants if book studies are to be used as a viable source of organized professional development. Also, because the ultimate goal of a book study is aimed at improving the educational experience of students, it is important to make clear the link between the book message or theme of the book and how it can be adapted in each teacher's classroom environment. In addition, it will be especially important to craft the structure of a course in such a way that instructors, facilitators and participants understand their respective responsibilities, and are able to take part in an online book study with the expectation that they are also experiencing a formal professional learning activity. Below are areas of particular emphasis that should be considered in planning for online book studies.

Facilitator Needs:

In future online book studies it is important that the facilitator has the resources and time to adequately and appropriately provide teacher participants with meaningful feedback and to help shape discussions around the themes of the text. There were a few areas in which change could be beneficial to the program. In future book studies there needs to be added rigor to the facilitation procedures. The facilitators to the pilot study noted a need for the creation and use of a rubric, adequate time allotted for facilitating the training, and set forth a list of requirements for successful facilitation of the book study. In order to keep participant interest and ensure that discussions stay focused and relevant, facilitators need to be motivating to the learners. This includes providing quick and constructive feedback that is relevant to the individual teacher. Facilitators need to be familiar with the online forum and should have knowledge not only of the book study format, but be comfortable with the computer medium as well.

Participant Needs:

In addition to the needs of program facilitators, the needs of future book study participants are also important to planning any further book studies. Participants need *to have clear goals established prior to the onset of the course*. Regardless of the text at the center of the discussion, it is important that the participants *stay focused on the goal of increasing the quality of education for their students*. Participants also need a *clear agenda of the course proceedings, course length, time for completion of assignments and discussion posts, and any other course completion requirements*. Finally, at the onset of the program it is most important for participants to know what value they should take away from the book study as a whole, which will shape how they read the text and utilize the information.