Theory-to-Practice

Implementing Teacher Competencies as a Professional Development Activity

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Professional development is an important component to all adult education programs. With the advent of the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education's (ABLE) continuous program improvement initiative known as Education Quality for Adult Literacy (EQUAL), the importance of professional development has been brought to the forefront.

As the EQUAL initiative has grown each year, so has the wealth and availability of professional development opportunities. With so much "training" available to teachers, administrators, and tutors, the question arises: How is valuable professional development time best spent? More importantly, how is professional development tied to individual teaching needs? Further, what impact does participation in professional development have on the classroom?

The teachers in the Somerset County Technology Center Adult Education program have been strong supporters of EQUAL and its professional development activities. However, relating professional development to its effectiveness in the classroom has been a difficult task to measure. During program year 2000-2001 our Program Improvement Team chose to participate in the Teacher Competency Strand as part of its EQUAL initiative. Two teachers volunteered to participate in the training in which they would assess their teaching skills against a set of teaching competencies developed under the Teacher Competency Training Strand. The method used to assess their skills was for the teachers to rate their teaching performance against a core measure of competencies. At the end of the assessment the teachers chose two competencies upon which to focus. One competency was an identified need, and professional de-

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velopment was implemented through the year to improve that teaching skill. The second selected competency was a strength, and the teacher would show proof of his or her competence in this area by validating work performed through the year. To document their performances the teachers maintained a portfolio of professional development, achievements, lesson plans, and activities. At the end of the year the teachers reassessed their skills against the competencies to determine if professional development growth had taken place.

Statement of the Problem and the Setting

Professional development in adult education has become a means to qualify and bring accountability to a field that has been criticized for lack of such measures when compared to traditional education methods and systems. In 1993 the newly appointed director of the Pennsylvania Department of Education's Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education, Cheryl Keenan, sought to bring value to the field by implementing a system of continuous program improvement and professional development. The EQUAL initiative was implemented in 1994 with 22 pilot site agencies. The new initiative sought to focus on program individuality and how best to identify each program's specific professional development needs (Keenan, 1999).

Over the years the EQUAL process has grown in phases to include all of the state's 230 adult basic and literacy education programs. As part of the process programs are involved in making "program improvement plans," which map out the program's goals for the year. Those plans include participation in one of several selected training strands.

During its initial 2000-2001 Program Improvement Meeting the Somerset program chose to participate in the Teacher Competency Strand. It was our belief that our teachers participated in many professional development activities but had no specific measure of those activities and their effectiveness as they related to their classroom teaching performance. Bridging the gap between professional development training and classroom application was not always clearly identified or measurable. The Teacher Competency training would provide a means by which teachers could gauge their strengths and weaknesses. By identifying teaching skills and rating them, teachers would be able to identify particular strengths and weaknesses and then map out a specific professional development plan for themselves. First, the individualized plan would enable teachers to build upon their strengths and to develop new and stronger

means of classroom instruction as well as sharing that expertise with our program teachers. Second, identifying some weaknesses would provide the basis for working toward specific goals for improvement, identifying professional development activities to improve skills, and, thereby, becoming stronger teachers.

The Somerset County Technology Center Adult Education program operates in the Appalachian region of southwest Pennsylvania. Somerset County is a large, rural county consisting of numerous small communities with primary employment centering on tourism, agriculture, and light industrial manufacturing. Nine part-time teachers and a program administrator staff the literacy program of the Somerset County Technology Center. Volunteers who assist in tutoring students supplement instruction. The program receives funding from the Pennsylvania Department of Education as well as local Workforce Investment Act (WIA) grants. Grants include Federal 231, State Act 143 Literacy, State Act 143 Family Literacy, WIA Adult Literacy, WIA Youth Literacy, and WIA Dislocated Worker. The program serves approximately 300 students each year under these programs. Programming includes adult basic education (ABE), preparation for General Education Diploma (GED), family literacy, and English as a second language.

Classes are conducted throughout the county and are scheduled at various times to accommodate students. Teachers are assigned to classes for the year, and most classes are multi-level, serving the range of students from basic to GED level. However, there are some specified classes that serve specific levels of low ABE, GED, and ESL students as well as specified Family Literacy classes. With many teachers instructing a wide range of students, traditional classroom approaches and techniques are not appropriate. An individualized approach is used which makes the teacher's job that much more difficult. Historically adult education teachers have a wide background of credentials and experiences, with many coming from traditional secondary teaching preparations. Many are not adept at handling such a wide spectrum of educational needs. Thus, the need for professional development has played an important role in targeting teacher skill development.

The Intervention

Each year teachers at the Somerset County Technology Center participate in professional development activities as part of its Program Improvement Plan. The teachers participated in these activities, but they do

not have a good measure of the effectiveness of these activities in the classroom and the impact on their teaching skills. Choosing to participate in the Teacher Competency Strand gave the participating teachers an opportunity to assess their skills, choose an appropriate professional development "track," and, most importantly, document their activities through a portfolio.

For this project two teachers volunteered to participate as part of the school's EQUAL program improvement activity. One teacher is new to adult education and works primarily in the family literacy program. The second teacher is an experienced educator in adult education and adult literacy and works in family literacy as well as other GED and ABE classes.

The two participants, along with the administrator, attended the Teacher Competency kick-off in October of the program year. During the initial training, the participants became familiar with and completed the Teacher Competency Assessment Instrument, known as the *Self-Directed Staff Development Assessment Instrument*. This tool is the baseline instrument used to rate the participant's skills against the core measure of competencies. After the initial training was completed, the administrator scheduled an interview with each of the participating teachers to review the assessment and to develop a Professional Action Plan. The Professional Action Plan entails selecting two competencies from the assessment instrument upon which to focus. The one competency is an identified need, and the other is identified as a strength. The Professional Action Plan is then developed to map out the documentation of strengthening the weakness and of validating the strong competency. Activities, along with a time line, are developed to achieve those goals. Objectives are identified as to their impact on learners, colleagues, and/or the program. To document the progress, each participant maintains a portfolio illustrating his or her professional development activities and implementation in the classroom. At the conclusion of the program year the participants are asked to reassess their skills to measure the impact of the intervention.

Choosing which competencies teachers may select for implementation in their professional action plan is a process that teachers and administrators may choose to work out and negotiate together. The self-assessment guide is a good discussion document by which teachers and administrators may share perspectives on a teacher's abilities, skills, and styles, as well as program needs, goals, and priorities. This process brings mutual improvement to the teacher as well as the program.

Following negotiations, the novice teacher chose, as her need, to work on a competency to improve curriculum. She chose Standard B—Instructional Expertise, Unit 1—Exhibits Command of Content, Competency 2—Develops and Organizes Curriculum. The teacher planned to create Parent and Child Together (PACT) activities that would incorporate learning and hands-on activities for families involved in her family literacy class. The teacher planned to create four thematic dinners throughout the year that would involve learning activities for the whole family. The lesson plans included such concepts as budgeting, measuring, and planning, as well as communications and teamwork. Her portfolio included both lesson plans and student work by including pictures and written comments by the children.

The experienced teacher decided to improve community interaction through the use of technology, working on Standard C—Community Interaction, Unit 2—Encourages Adult Learner Involvement in the Community, Competency 2—Utilizes Technology to Build Student Awareness of the Community and the World. Her goals were to use the Internet to access information on community issues and resources, to teach learners to access information on community issues and resources, and to integrate and create computer-based assignments related to community and work issues. Her portfolio included computer-based assignments, Internet search guides, and lesson plans, as well as a catalog of community web sites, which students may access.

The Documentation of Tools

The main tool used in this project is the *Self-Directed Staff Development Assessment Instrument*. The instrument was originally developed in 1999 and comprises five standards, 13 subunits, 29 performance indicators, and 139 competencies. The five main standards are categories that represent broad areas of teacher responsibility and practitioner skills. The first standard, Understands and Uses Adult Theory in Practice, was designed to assess teachers' knowledge and use in implementing adult theory within the classroom. The second standard, Instructional Expertise, assesses the real "nuts and bolts" issues of teaching in an adult education classroom. Teaching skills such as command of subject area, use of curriculum, and use of instructional plans are addressed in this standard. The third standard, Community Interaction, addresses practitioners' collaborative efforts in using community resources, as well as encouragement and guidance of their students' role and involvement within

their community. The fourth standard, Professional Development, assesses teachers' ongoing commitment to lifelong learning and continuous professional improvement. The final standard, Program Operations, assesses teachers' knowledge of their role within an organization.

Participants are asked to rate themselves using the instrument. For each of the 13 subunits the participants are asked to assign a value for teaching relevance and program priority. The values assigned range on a scale from one to five, with one being low relevance or priority and five being high relevance or priority. The ratings in these subunits are important for assessing the views that are of importance to the participant.

Each subunit has a set of competencies that reflect skills within the topic area, and each competency has a teaching level assigned to it. This level indicates the degree in which a teacher should hold proficiency with the competencies. The three performance levels are novice, experienced, and master. The novice level would indicate a teacher who is engaged in core teaching competencies as part of his/her professional development. The experienced level denotes a teacher who has demonstrated effectively 90% of entrance-level competencies and has taken a leadership role in professional development at the local or regional level. The master level indicates a teacher who has mastered 90% of the experienced-level competencies, is engaged in a plan to master experienced-level competencies, and has taken a leadership role in professional development at the state or national level. Participants assess their skills against these standards by rating their practitioner's expertise using a scale of one to five, with one designating low expertise and five designating a high level of expertise.

The benefits of this instrument are the weighted levels within the subunits and competencies and how the instrument affects each participant on an individual basis. The individuality of this instrument lends itself to the particular needs of a teacher who comes to this field with a varied background in education and experience. In the field of adult education this type of assessment is important so that teachers may focus on skills that have been identified as core needs and allows them to move through a hierarchy of ability.

The Results of the Intervention

Each teacher was asked to complete the *Self-Directed Staff Development Assessment Instrument* in a pre- and postmeasure technique. The

preassessment was conducted in the beginning of the program year prior to the implementation of professional development activities. Throughout the program year the teachers implemented professional development activities as identified by their Professional Development Plan, which was developed from the *Self-Directed Staff Development Assessment Instrument*. At the conclusion of the program year, the teachers were reassessed with a post measure to determine if the professional development activities identified in the Professional Development Plan were effective.

Of the 139 competencies there are 65 novice-level competencies, 51 experienced-level competencies, and 23 master-level competencies. Rating points are assigned to each competency using a scale of one to five. Therefore, a comparison of the pre- and postmeasures can be made for each of the three competency levels. The self-assessment measures were tabulated for each teacher and compared. The data that were examined compared changes in self-assessed skill levels for each competency using the one-to-five rating scale at the three levels of novice, experienced, and master.

Data from the experienced teacher indicated an increase at each level. At the novice level the teacher increased her overall rating by 29 points. At the experienced level this teacher increased by 32 points. Finally, at the master level the teacher had an overall increase of 12 points. The novice teacher had very similar results. She increased 31 at the novice level, 32 points at the experienced level, and 18 points at the master level.

If a top rating of five was attributed to each category and tallied, there would be an achievable total of 325 in the novice level, 255 in the experienced level, and 115 at the master level. The experienced teacher's totals for each level on the preassessment were 267 for the novice level, 180 for experienced, and 61 for the master. Therefore, this teacher posted significant gains at each level. For the novice level she posted an 11% gain, 15% at the experienced level, and 16% at the master level. The novice teacher's totals were 236 for novice, 158 for experienced, and 39 for master. Her increases were also significant. She had a 12% increase at the novice level, 17% for experienced, and 32% at the master level.

At the conclusion of the project, the teachers were asked to reflect upon their participation in the project. Both teachers felt that participation in the project was a very positive experience, that their teaching confidence increased, and that each grew "professionally." The teachers' comments were inspiring. Following are some of their comments.

The experienced teacher's comments:

"I was encouraged to try some new things."

"I created many new lesson plans, worksheets, etc., as a result of this project."

"I feel that I was able to significantly affect my students, that they learned a great deal and 'grew' during the year."

"I am happy to have put together my portfolio; it was good to look back and see what I've accomplished."

The novice teacher's comments:

"I was more systematic in my approach to teaching."

"I became more intentional because my objectives were clear; my plans were laid out."

"It was helping me be a better teacher and in helping the students be more integrated in the learning process. It actually energized me as well."

"I did change my curriculum to make my lessons more relevant."

The Reflection on the Intervention

The intervention of having teachers becoming involved in self-assessment of skills against a set of competencies and developing a professional development action plan has been a positive and rewarding endeavor for the participants as well as the program. Through the intervention the teachers were able to gauge their teaching effectiveness by assessing their own skills and judging those skills against a set of standards. This process allowed the teachers to focus on their needs, as well as on their strengths, and to develop a professional development plan that allowed them to use this information to improve their skills.

The highlights of the project were the portfolios developed by the teachers to document their professional development activities throughout the year. The portfolios were a tangible record of accomplishments, something to reflect back on and to keep as a reference for future use. The portfolios provided documentation of growth and something of which to be proud.

There are many implications for the future use of this process. The use of teacher competencies and the development of a portfolio can provide a concrete and fair means of teacher evaluation. Identifying teacher competencies can also be a means to qualify participation in training and other professional development activities. As an adapted tool, teacher competencies can be used as a measure to hire a new teacher.

For our program participation in the Teacher Competency Strand was a proving ground. Through participation in this project our teachers were able to share their progress throughout the year during our program improvement meetings. This sharing has laid the groundwork for all teachers in our program to be aware of this opportunity and to participate in this activity for the coming year.

As an administrator, I believe that this activity was of great benefit to both the program and the teachers. It is anticipated that this activity will become a program-wide activity in which all staff will participate.

Lifelong learning is a goal for everyone. This statement rings particularly true for adult educators. Involvement in such professional development activities as this project is an important step in bringing professionalism to our field.

Resource

Keenan, C. (1999). Guiding improvement: Pennsylvania's odyssey [Electronic version]. *Focus on Basics*, *3*(B), 13-16.