Innovation in Professional Development: Building Intense, Alternative, Content Drive Sessions to Meet Participant Needs

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For ten years, professors and staff from ********** University have partnered with schools throughout the state of Georgia to provide hands-on professional development during summer months funded by the Improving Teacher Quality Program. The partnership seeks to provide social studies, science, and math content knowledge to teachers through grants from Teacher Quality. Many teachers, especially elementary and middle grades, often discuss how challenging it is to cover all of the required content, specifically in science and social studies. There is not a focus on these two subjects in most districts because of the lack of testing requirements. Yet, both disciplines are part of the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards while literacy components and can be taught parallel to each other. The partnership provides in depth content knowledge from professors from the College of Science and Technology as well as in field professionals including Stone Mountain educators and other community resources from the research facilities on Jekyll Island and Sapelo Island. Furthermore, staff from the College of Education and consultants from other public schools provide modeling and instruction on best practices in literacy and integration of math and technology in all content areas. The week long workshops therefore provide in depth explorations of teacher content knowledge with further development of best practices for classroom instruction as paralleled in Georgia state frameworks.

The workshops are sought after by teaching professionals to develop personal knowledge of content of the state standards in subject areas as professionals are often expected to teach a variety of topics without school based professional development in these areas. Furthermore, primary sources, expertise of experts in the field, photographs, videos, and artifacts are gathered by teachers to immediately be used in their classrooms. The quality of the workshops is measured by a comparison of pre and post test data as well as follow up observations of classroom practice by the ********** University staff. These data points help to document an increase in content knowledge of nearly thirty percentage points. Data from past years also documents an increase in overall CRCT results and attributed those results to the content they had learned during the workshops.

Teachers are now facing a transition period where the content knowledge of the teachers themselves must change to address Standards for Mathematical Practice, technology competencies of all students including modeling with interactive and online resources, increased proficiencies in literacy strategies in the mathematics and sciences classrooms, and a newly added requirement to regularly provide real world videos and pictures delivering real world problems to students in a mathematical perspective. The importance for the Georgia Landforms Workshop, Georgia Barrier Islands Workshop, and Georgia Rocks and Minerals Workshop is rooted in the same research that states we can raise students’ achievement scores in science by using a hands-on approach to learning with the student. Field trips where the student is actively involved in the learning have been shown to increase learning and comprehension of the material. If the students learn best by being actively involved, then the teachers may also learn best by being active learners and experiencing the landforms first hand. The teachers will become more familiar with the content and different ways to implement this new found knowledge to the students in a way that reaches the various learning styles of students.
Research has shown that growth through professional development will most likely occur with the willing participation of the teacher. Therefore, a strength of the workshop lies in the teachers’ willing participation in the summer program. Teachers are gone from their home and family for a week with nominal financial benefits. Yet there is a wait list each year for each workshop. Why are there wait lists? Why do teachers encourage their colleagues to participate the following year? The answers lie in the building of workshops that focus on current data and participant needs. The workshops are unscripted in that the basic agenda and ultimate goals are set. However, the results of the pre-test given to the participants and CRCT data drive the unique professional development sessions within the workshop.