



A professional “pro” academy for career and technical educators (CTE) in central Pennsylvania has catalyzed projects, networks and friendships across schools to strengthen the performance and morale of those seeking mid- to late-career enrichment. While conventional teacher training focuses on cultivating the novice teacher followed by years of mandatory in-service education, the pro academy galvanizes experienced teachers across a wide region for participant-driven training and partnerships that address common concerns and talent development. The following stories highlight the contributions of CTE teachers as they collaborate and engage in interdisciplinary projects to enhance instructional practice and benefit the community at large.

History & Background

The pro academy began in the spring of 2014 as a pilot program at Penn State’s Professional Personnel Development Center upon recognizing the need to allocate resources for CTE teachers completely certified and professionally thriving, yet still seeking ongoing development and a broader, deeper network of support. Each cycle recruits top teachers and identifies their interests through informal needs assessments, overcoming geographic difference for interdisciplinary collaboration that culminates in a presentation at the Pennsylvania Career and Technical Education Conference (PA*CTEC). Upon completion of the academy experience, the expectation is that teachers continue to share best practices through informal and formal professional net-

works. Recruitment occurs through applicant initiative, director nomination and evidence of a strong instructional background. Initiated by the center’s director and facilitated by the center’s professional development team, the pilot pro academy introduced several participants to interdisciplinary collaboration under that year’s umbrella theme of “Technology and Engagement.” (In subsequent years, selected themes reflected data from year-end surveys of a completing cohort and interests identified from a needs assessment delivered to a new cohort.)

Eleven teachers representing diverse occupations came together to delve into a related, more-specific topic of choice, such as project-based learning or the integration of Moodle in class instruction. As a network of support grew, participants from that year requested a follow-up reunion and it became clear that social and professional bonds merited the initial effort. For the rural communities of central Pennsylvania, projects banding teachers together met a compelling need. Inaugural academy participant Patti Leibfreid, a culinary arts instructor, noted: “As I work in a small rural community and technical college (CTC), the opportunities for me to collaborate with fellow CTE instructors interested in broadening a specific aspect of their pedagogy is limited.”

Later, in the fall of 2014, six outstanding educators undertook projects related to motivation and brain-based learning. Teachers in culinary arts, veterinary assisting and dental assisting jointly explored the neural connectivity promoting the affective domain of learning and applied new ideas to their roles as teachers and program recruiters. This

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innovative dialogue prompted a reform of the traditional lecture-oriented spiel of student recruitment in a culinary arts program. To increase her program enrollment, culinary arts instructor Daci Killinger adopted a holistic developmental approach for recruiting new students, focusing on neural connectivity from integrated use of content in instruction, students' physical movement and warm interaction. Meanwhile, instructors in diesel technology and heavy equipment explored how to make class instruction more motivational, a collaboration that led to touring each other's work areas, multiple presentations, and research-based projects. This endeavor inspired participating teachers to lead problem-based learning units at their own schools, addressing entrepreneurial student learning in the real-life predicament of creating a trucking company from scratch. These layers of contribution represent the rippling effects of bringing together the ideas of highly skilled CTE instructors across schools, disciplines and affiliations.

Educating Teachers as Leaders

The 2015–16 school year began with instructional talent in literacy, cosmetology, HVAC, electronics and criminal justice as well as unanimous professional interest in collaborative teacher leadership. As professional development facilitators for the academy, we are drawn to support teacher-driven ideas and projects because they usually bring forth positive energy and teacher buy-in. For this reason, identifying thematic unity in the professional interests of a cohort of “pros” was exciting!

To seize the professional learning opportunity, each participant reflected

on their own leadership style and contributed to a deeper understanding of strength-based leadership as we read the book *StrengthFinders 2.0* by Tom Rath. From this ongoing discussion about leadership during in-person meetings and virtual correspondence, ideas emerged to impact the traditional practice of professional development in schools. Participants agreed that the value of professional **learning** led by intrinsic teacher motivation exceeded the value of professional **development** propelled by extrinsic, school-based motivation. Each identified their signature strengths that tended to guide progress in teaching and professional learning communities. Conference presentations and leadership development from this cohort continue to this day, bringing out the best in teacher-led professional learning. Michelle Prybyla, a cosmetology instructor now pursuing her master's in workforce education and development, commented, "I enjoyed collaborating with other teachers and found that my leadership skills improved both in the classroom and in life."

Over the years, participants have also expressed the value of interdisciplinary work within general occupational areas. To honor this hybrid discussion with a more content-specific occupational focus, the 2017 pro academy recruited participants selectively from the broad categories of "transportation" and "health occupations." As expected, an automotive mechanics instructor had much to offer a collision repair instructor and vice versa, just as the sports therapy and nurse aide instructors had ideas to benefit the other. The year's overarching theme featured the organi-

zation, development and practice of appreciative inquiry, recognizing the best in each other's programs and working to strengthen promising practices and relational assets.

Collaboration Through Networking

Pro academy participants recognized that teacher collaboration through networking is a critical asset, but one typically burdened by time and geographic constraints. The health occupations instructors used video conferencing to virtually visit each other's classrooms, share content expertise and teaching resources, and ask one another for advice in a natural give-and-take forum. The transportation instructors also used video conferencing, in their case to share best practices for integrating employability skill development into their workshops.

Doug Stimely, an automotive mechanics instructor, gained many takeaways from this experience, including, "outstanding networking with other instructors from different programs, learning their techniques, expanding my learning [and] engaging my students in our mission." Out of this conversation, Doug was inspired to create and produce a video-recorded simulation of an auto-shop scenario related to professionalism and customer service, complete with actors and post-scenario debriefing with students. The simulation was eye-opening for both students and teachers alike and provided a means for reflection on their knowledge of dispositional employability in the automotive field.

At present, the health occupations cohort has committed to continued

networking through participation in virtual meetings on a monthly basis. It now welcomes novice health occupations educators into the fold. The meetings provide an open forum for teachers to share best practices related to classroom management, instructional demonstrations, assessments, NOCTI preparation and much more as determined by the group's individual interests and learning needs.

A lead participant in this cohort, Brandi Mellott, commented: "It was a wonderful opportunity to participate in the pro academy. It gave me a chance to network with peers from across the state, a chance I wouldn't have had otherwise since I live in a very rural area with a large distance between our school and another CTC. I have always been a fan of technology use in the classroom, and with that as our topic, I was able to learn new technologies and techniques that I have since been able to incorporate into my classroom."

Lasting Impact

These stories echo a seasoned teacher's preference to network and strategize, both for the purpose of meeting student learning objectives and to sustain and boost morale. The small-group nature of the pro academy has created space for fleshing out individual concerns, and prompting innovation in multiple areas, including leadership, technology use, teaching strategies and curriculum development. Successful collaboration can prove to be a game changer in the classroom as new knowledge is generated in a small professional learning group and then facilitated in the classroom. Interdisciplinary, discussion-based collabora-

tion among professional educators adds customized learning opportunities that borrow the best insights and practices from each field. What is unique about the pro academy is that it combines elements of an in-person workshop or seminar series with activities in between according to teacher choice (e.g., videoconferencing, research, mentoring or observation). This multi-dimensional model allows teachers to create their own professional learning objectives and pursue knowledge in a flexible, year-long time frame supported by a cohort of encouraging peers.

In addition to providing a platform for professional networking, the pro academy experience offers a chance for educators to support one another in an environment where change is constant. Former pro-academy participant, Kenneth Hassinger commented, “To be a successful CTE instructor, you must continue updating yourself on what is new in your field. You need to be connected with your peers to stay current with best teaching practices.”

As participants work with one another, they form professional and emotional bonds that prove to be useful as teaching challenges arise. Killinger described the experience as one that “pulled me out of my comfort zone, which I feel helped me grow professionally.” Being part of a cohort has provided a challenging yet safe space for participants to explore current problems and seek solutions through articulation of needs, focused group brainstorming, and reflection at the individual and group level.

Educators are tasked with disseminating relevant knowledge and processes in an engaging and meaningful way as op-

posed to just iterating information. The pro academy mirrors the ideal of proactive student learning experiences as participants draw from their interests and critical-thinking skills to problem-solve their own teaching challenges. Most of all, though, the pro academy fosters professional friendships and the spirit of lifelong learning.

Our participants prefer troubleshooting with people they are learning to know well, clearly contrasting that with the impersonality of an information-dense web search for instructional strategy. Some of the best ideas come out of the least formal conversations, and relationships are truly the key to the success of projects like the pro academy; the bonds created through sustained involvement can be long-lasting and meaningful. Through these relationships, new ideas are formed, techniques are tested, and teaching remains challenging and relevant even for seasoned professionals. The basic structure of the pro academy can be easily replicated, bearing much similarity to the popularity of professional learning communities within schools, but the unique outcomes each year are shaped by the commitment, passion, creativity and excellence that each professional brings to the group. ■

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