



2017

# Measuring Our Impact: What Did Our Attendees Think of Our Conference?

Louisa Kramer-Vida

*College of Education and Information Technology LIUPost, [louisa.vida@liu.edu](mailto:louisa.vida@liu.edu)*

Karen Meier

[Kar18@aol.com](mailto:Kar18@aol.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.buffalostate.edu/lls>

 Part of the [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#), and the [Other Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Kramer-Vida, Louisa and Meier, Karen (2017) "Measuring Our Impact: What Did Our Attendees Think of Our Conference?," *The Language and Literacy Spectrum*: Vol. 27 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.buffalostate.edu/lls/vol27/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons at Buffalo State. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Language and Literacy Spectrum by an authorized editor of Digital Commons at Buffalo State. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@buffalostate.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@buffalostate.edu).

## MEASURING OUR IMPACT

How do adults learn? How do professional educators want to learn? What are the professional needs of our teachers? And how can our conference planning committee's knowledge of how adults learn guide us as we choose and schedule our keynote speakers and individual session presenters?

### **Ideas from the Professional Literature**

Professional development training is viewed as an ongoing means to improve content knowledge and pedagogical skills, and a way to adjust teaching attitudes that positively affect and influence the improvement of professional practice (Yim & Ebbeck, 2011), ultimately enhancing student performance by allowing teachers to refresh their prior knowledge and to learn about new concepts in the field (Khan & Chishti, 2012). Pentimonti and Justice (2009) concluded that teachers need professional development to incorporate scaffolded strategies into the creation of a learning environment. Furthermore, a study where teachers completed 84 hours of professional development over a course of 13 months influenced teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and practices. This professional development assisted teachers as they made significant gains in their knowledge for overall teaching and learning (Polly, Neale, & Pugalee, 2014).

States, higher education, and school districts have responded to changes in mandated professional development. Licensure, certification, and teacher preparation programs are now acknowledging the role of professional development (Lieberman & Wilkins, 2006). Conferences such as ours assist in this endeavor by supplementing the efforts of local districts.

### **Objectives of the Conference Planning Committee**

Our conference planning committee is composed of current and former ELA public school teachers and administrators. Former K-12 professionals are now employed as university

## MEASURING OUR IMPACT

level professors and administrators. We are teachers, professors, and district and building administrators whose goal is to advance the professional knowledge and skills of language arts related teachers from Kindergarten through Grade 12. Our knowledge base comes from our own experience as public school leaders who continually seek to assist our department and building faculty as they strive for success with diverse populations.

As such, we are always looking for innovations and programs that exist in our local schools and empower literacy learning. We want to share these with our colleagues, to give them new tools to assist them as they guide their students toward increased literacy and language arts skills. This includes ideas for daily instruction as well as instruction meant to prepare students for state exams. We want to expose our participants to new technologies and materials which they can immediately apply in their classrooms and tap into their students' strengths and interests. As our state standards are currently being revisited, wordsmithed, and reorganized, we want to support the most vital literacy empowering components of these standards and encourage our attendees to focus on what is good and powerful practice for life-long literacy.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Since Knowles wrote *The Modern Practice of Adult Education* in 1970, andragogy, that is, the art and science of methods and techniques to teach adults, has impacted American adult education. Our conference planning focuses on Knowles' principles. We want all of our sessions to be learner centered and learner directed. We feel that our attendees learn best when they have input into what, why, and how they learn. Thus, the conference committee seriously reviews evaluation forms and utilizes the information gained as we plan future professional development activities. We also tap into the needs and interests of educators in our own districts and universities as that gives us firsthand knowledge of current thinking and new programs and

## MEASURING OUR IMPACT

approaches that are proving successful with students. We want the content of all of our conference sessions to have meaningful relationships to our attendees' past and current life experience and, in the sessions, we hope the participants use their own and their peers' experience as a learning resource to become more refined and competent teachers.

Our aim, as the committee members cooperatively plan the program, is for every workshop session and keynote topic to relate to the current needs and interests of our audience and the local educational community. This type of learning climate is cooperative, minimizes a learner's anxiety, and encourages educators to feel free to experiment in their own classrooms. Educators come to our conference because they are interested in listening to how other local educators solve the same issues they are facing with their own students. They become excited by a new technique or idea they can incorporate immediately into their classrooms, especially as related to literacy education. As all of our attendees choose to come to our conference (They are not sent by their schools or districts.), these educators are internally motivated to learn (Henschke, 2011; Merriam, 2001; web.njit.edu).

### **What the Learning Looks Like**

For 12 years, two professional organizations geared toward professional development in the area of literacy for local teachers have held a joint annual conference. This one-day conference is composed of two keynotes, a pedagogue, and an author, both often sponsored by book companies, and approximately 20 workshop sessions led by volunteer, mostly local, educators. Additionally, approximately 30 literacy-related vendors, ranging from major national companies to local bookstores, share their latest materials with our attendees.

## MEASURING OUR IMPACT

### **Who Attended Our Local Conference**

Our two organizations, one affiliated with the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the other affiliated with the International Literacy Association (ILA), disseminate conference-related information by posting to our websites and local listservs, emailing our memberships, and publicizing at various meetings of English Language Arts Administrators from October through February. We lobby central office administrators within our own districts to encourage them to send their educators to our conference. The result is impressive. This year, almost 300 educators attended our one-day conference, which was held in a centrally located, easy to access, major hotel. Of those who indicated their position on the registration form, 98 are elementary educators. They represent classroom teachers, reading teachers, special education teachers, English as a New Language (ENL) teachers, library media specialists, and literacy coaches. Forty-seven middle school English, Reading, ENL and Library teachers attended, as did 60 high school English, Social Studies, ENL, Reading and Library teachers. Forty-seven individuals indicated that they are ELA chairs, ELA coordinators, ELA supervisors, assistant principals, principals, or assistant superintendents. Interestingly, we also had approximately 30 ELA retirees, adjuncts, and consultants.

### **Information from Conference Evaluation Forms**

Every one of our conferences boasts two keynote speakers: one who is a pedagogue and one who is a well-known children's/adolescent author. At our most recent conference, 97% of the respondents said that the entertaining author was excellent, while the other 3% rated her as good. The pedagogue did not fare as well. Responses to his presentation were: 69% excellent, 23% good, and 8% fair. This pedagogue was heavily research based and informational, and while he was interesting and informative, he did not offer practical ideas for implementation, nor

## MEASURING OUR IMPACT

was he entertaining or inspirational. Our past experience has taught us that any keynote speaker must be equal parts informational, practical, entertaining, and inspirational to receive a rating of excellent from our attendees.

Our most recent conference offered 19 workshop sessions that ran in two time slots immediately following the morning keynote speaker. The Common Core Learning Standards were addressed in some fashion in every workshop. Results from our workshop evaluation forms indicated that 53% of our conference attendees rated their workshop experience as excellent and 41% rated it as good, with another 5% rating their experience as fair, and the remaining 1% rating it as poor. We use this information yearly as we choose themes and topics for future conferences and as the committee chooses which workshop presenters to reaccept, as we often have presenters submit proposals over multiple years.

Our attendees indicated that what they learned from workshop sessions was very practical and could quickly and easily be transferred to classroom practice. For example, one teacher said, “I love to learn all new apps for use in class with Google Chrome.” Another educator who attended the same session asserted, “I am going to get away from traditional book reports and use more ed tech [sic] with my literacy activities.”

One conference session dealt with establishing a culture of thinking. One evaluation read, “I am grateful you shared your Chalktalk questions and sample student responses.” Another attendee commented that she “loved the hands-on activities for kids,” while a third responded, “I appreciate the strategies. Always looking for new ways to concretize the thinking process.”

“Great sample lessons!” was a comment from a session on achieving next generation literacy, while an attendee at a college essay writing session stated, “ [Presenters] so generously shared all of their materials. Can’t thank you enough! It was clear that these women are

## MEASURING OUR IMPACT

committed to their students and their craft. From a mom of an 11<sup>th</sup> grader and a reading teacher!”

Quality questioning was the topic of another well received presentation. In addition to being happy to receive “text referrals,” an audience member noted, “Questioning absolutely changes the level of thinking and engagement of students and to have this focus I feel changes instruction.” Additionally, an administrator commented about this session by saying, “One of the best, theoretical yet concrete PDs I’ve ever been to. I have 10 PD sessions for my department in these materials!” Yet another educator said, “I like being challenged to reconsider how I plan for discussion.”

In a session on finding a balance for writing instruction in the classroom, one teacher said, “I can’t wait to try the black out activity next week!” Another educator loved the anchor charts, and a third again spoke about the black out poems “as well as WWII poems – fits in well with my curriculum and the interests of the students.”

The session entitled *From Infographics to Augmented Reality* influenced one teacher to say, “I am looking forward to creating infographics to promote writing and creativity”, while a session on engaging reluctant readers prompted this comment: “Helpful for planning with other disciplines. Thanks for brainstorming school ‘trips’ for students who can’t afford expensive field trips.”

One session was devoted to using an interdisciplinary approach to transform summer reading and garnered enthusiastic responses. “I am very interested in changing how my school presents summer reading. I am intrigued by the cloud-based approach as well as the interdisciplinary idea.” “... I would love to hear even more about the summer projects from the

## MEASURING OUR IMPACT

other disciplines.” “This will generate very relevant and timely discussions in our district that will hopefully result in taking action!”

Our vendors tell us that they love the response they receive from the conference attendees and 99% of the conference participants seem to agree, evaluating meeting with the vendors as an excellent or good learning experience.

Food is always an important factor for the committee to consider, as it tends not so much to be a draw, as it is a source of complaints if there is an issue. This year, 44% rated breakfast and lunch as excellent, 48% rated meals as good, 6% rated them as fair, and, unfortunately, we received one poor rating. We wonder if it was from the same person who did not like the workshop offerings! Or is it from the person who thought we should offer snacks while the attendees listen to the presenters? Maybe that is something we should consider! Does food help adults learn?

We understand that some attendees do not complete evaluation forms, so we do not consider these numbers or comments representative, as much as we consider them indicative of educators' opinions of the workshop sessions and the conference as a whole. In general, it was flattering that many thought the committee had done a great job and stated that they had had a wonderful day. Every year some attendees express a wish for more workshop sessions on their grade level (ex: more on the elementary level) or in their specific area of interest (ex: more Advanced Placement). We always endeavor to balance the number of sessions available to all grade level bands and to include sessions on the most current topics, but have found, over the years, that a few always wish for something we have not offered. Something that surprised us this year was the high number of reading teachers and literacy coaches who attended, as opposed to a preponderance of classroom teachers. Some went to workshops given by well-known local

## MEASURING OUR IMPACT

and national consultants, but felt that those workshops were geared more towards inexperienced elementary teachers, and did not meet their needs. Overall, however, most of the evaluations seemed to come from elementary teachers and administrators, so we'd like to think that the secondary educators, even if they did not choose to complete evaluation forms, enjoyed the day and were pleased with the content of the presentations.

### **Some Comments About Individual Sessions**

Attendees evaluate each workshop session on four criteria: the materials that are shared, the presenters' knowledge, the organization of the presentation, and classroom applicability. Sessions with a technology focus were well received, and any sessions with one or more websites to share were valued because those websites provided the information attendees needed to implement what they learned. Other popular and positively received sessions were geared toward writing (running the gamut from college essay writing to primary reading/writing workshop), questioning and establishing a culture of thinking, next generation literacy, and independent and summer reading. Civil rights and other interdisciplinary projects and co-teaching for ENL and other students were not as popular at this conference.

Conference attendees like presentations that are well-prepared and easy for them to replicate in their own classrooms. Practicality seems to be the key. When presenters share materials on-line or on paper, they receive high ratings, and, conversely, many of the more negative comments relate to not having immediate access to Power Points or teacher-created materials that are discussed. A lack of organization or a feeling that the presenter has not used the cited method or taught the material themselves is quickly noted by the experienced teachers in the audience, who also prefer material that is generalizable and not specific to a particular district or school. Enthusiastic, passionate, knowledgeable presenters who tell their audience

## MEASURING OUR IMPACT

what is happening in their own classrooms are important to the attending teachers.

Administrators note that they are planning to turnkey new ideas in their own department or district meetings.

And, of course, it should be noted that, at times, an evaluation indicates that a workshop was good, but then has a negative comment to explain, essentially, why it was not rated as excellent. We understand that some educators are hesitant to critique their contemporaries who have volunteered to share their expertise and have spent time preparing for their presentation, but we do encourage our attendees to feel free to communicate with us, positively or negatively, about any aspect of the conference, because it helps us with future planning.

To sum up the general tone of the workshop evaluation comments, conference attendees were thrilled to listen to “amazing teachers who truly help their students.” We love to read comments such as, “The presenters were so enthusiastic and passionate about what they are doing and trying to share with us, that it is impossible not to get excited. I learned so much!” When we read comments like these, we know that we have chosen strong workshops with strong presenters who are positively affecting change in our attendees.

### **For Future Planning**

Before our local school systems were burdened with serious financial constraints (roughly the last six to eight years), our conference attendance was consistently between 400 and 450 attendees. We are pleased to see that over the last three years attendance at our conference has increased by 32%. We credit this improvement in attendance to paying attention to what our attendees want as gleaned from their submitted evaluations and their conversations with committee members. We also feel that attendees have been positively impacted by their experience, so they choose to apply to their districts to attend again. Therefore, if their principals,

## MEASURING OUR IMPACT

superintendents, and professional development administrators are repeatedly hiring substitute teachers and allowing their staff to attend our conference on a Friday, they must feel that their employees are receiving valuable professional development.

In terms of keynote speakers, as was also seen in the evaluations of the individual sessions, teachers and administrators want to learn about practical strategies and current materials. They are interested in the research behind what is being shared, but want this balanced with information, practical strategies, entertainment, and inspiration. We will remind our future keynoters to create an address that connects to our educators in all four of these areas.

Regarding individual workshop sessions, we will continue to do our best to choose presenters who are well respected in their districts and/or in our local educational community. We rely heavily on the opinions of those who have seen prospective presenters in their classrooms or in other professional development settings. We will, as always, review our notes about which topics worked and which did not from the previous conference, and we will endeavor to choose those which we hope will resonate with the majority of our attendees.

Our next set of keynote speakers, a pedagogue and an author, have been booked. We will put out our call for proposals in October and choose presentations for the conference by late December, keeping in mind the comments from last year, and giving presenters over two months to prepare their exhibitions and demonstrations. One key point, noted by all, is to continue with Wi-Fi for everyone, a feature we introduced with this past conference. We will encourage more and more educators to live Tweet and stream during the conference.

We will explore new ideas for workshops, such as a joint session for administrators and college professors (something we have discussed but never included) because we have noticed a gap between what secondary school and school district administrators want from college

## MEASURING OUR IMPACT

professors, especially those training pre-service teachers, and the experience some college faculty have of what current conditions really are like in their neighboring school districts. This session could be a round table, a format we have not used in recent years, co-moderated by a school administrator and a local professor. We hope this will create some interesting dialogue, as well as new formal partnerships among those stakeholders.

### **Conclusions**

As everyone knows who has run a successful conference, a lot of hard work by many dedicated volunteers makes for a successful day that runs smoothly. Our committee is quite experienced, as most of us have worked together since we began this joint venture 12 years ago, and we have also managed and/or worked on many committees that have produced state and national conferences. We are not at all looking for anyone to say “Thank You!”, but it is certainly nice to see comments like, “Thank you for a wonderful day”, “A fine time was had by all”, and, “As always, this conference was a wonderful experience. Thank you for the opportunity.”

So, from what you have just read, do our conferences have a positive effect on literacy educators? What do professional educators require from effective professional development and do we provide that? We think they learn from 1-day conferences with sessions led by peers who share materials that can be easily implemented in classrooms.

The financial constraints our local districts have had in recent years affected all local conferences and professional development offerings, even preventing some organizations from holding their symposia. But we have persevered. Our analysis shows that 33% of those who attend a conference return the next year. Some of our attendees come yearly and encourage other members of their departments or schools to join them. By listening to our colleagues,

## MEASURING OUR IMPACT

members, and attendees, we are steadily growing our conference to where it historically was. As long as we continue to follow our professional development beliefs and respond to the comments we receive each year, we will continue to plan for the best possible professional learning opportunities our conference can offer.

### References

Andragogy. Accessed from <https://web.njit.edu> on 6/30/17.

Henschke, J.A. (2011). Considerations regarding the future of andragogy. *Adult Learning* 22(1), 34-37.

Khan, S. B., & Chishti, S. (2012). Effects of Staff Training and Development on Professional Abilities of University Teachers in Distance Learning Systems. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 13(2), 87-94.

Lieberman, J., & Wilkins, E. (2006). The professional development pathways model: From policy to practice. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 42(3), 124-128.

Merriam, S.B. (2001). Andragogy and self-directed learning: Pillars of adult learning theory. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 2001(89), 3-11.

Pentimonti, J. M., & Justice, L. M. (2009). Teacher's use of scaffolding strategies during read alouds in the preschool classroom. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 37(1), 241-248.  
doi:10.1007/s10643-009-0348-6

Polly, D., Neale, H., & Pugalee, D. K. (2014). How Does Ongoing Task-Focused Mathematics Professional Development Influence Elementary School Teachers' Knowledge, Beliefs and Enacted Pedagogies? *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 42(1), 1-10.  
doi:10.1007/s10643-013-0585-6

## MEASURING OUR IMPACT

Yim, H. Y., & Ebbeck, M. (2011). Early childhood teachers' professional development in music: a cross-cultural study. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 36(3), 74-81.