

## **Well Facilitated Shoptalk as Democratic Professional Development for Teachers of English Language Learners**

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### **Abstract**

Democratic professional development is of the teachers, by the teachers, for the teachers. It differs from managerial models, which often have preset agendas and provide what “experts” think teachers need. Managerial models tend to be leader-centered, making some teachers feel treated like “tall children” rather than professionals. Democratic models are participant-centered, fostering collegiality and collaboration. Teachers determine their own needs and construct agendas based on issues of current relevance to them.

One simple yet powerful democratic model of professional development comes from the Great Teachers Movement (GTM). This model has been characterized as “well facilitated shoptalk,” promoting productive discussions and tapping into the collective knowledge, wisdom, creativity, expertise, and genius of participating teachers. This article explains the model so that it can be applied for teachers of English language learners (ELLs). Both authors are active in the GTM, facilitating seminars, retreats, and workshops for teachers of all disciplines and all levels of education. The first author has utilized the model specifically for in-service and pre-service teachers of ELLs. He directed two seminars for in-service public school teachers of English as a foreign language in Nanjing, China. He also uses the model in his pre-service teacher education courses to guide productive discussions about the teaching of English as a second language.

### **Introduction**

A democratic theory of education, according to Amy Gutmann, “makes a democratic virtue out of our inevitable disagreement over educational problems.” She explained that “the democratic virtue, too simply stated, is that we can publicly debate educational problems in a way much more likely to increase our understanding of education and each other than if we were to leave the management of schools, as Kant suggests, ‘to depend entirely upon the judgment of the most enlightened experts’” (Gutmann 1987, 11).

One of the problems with a top-down, expert-centered, managerial approach to professional development is that it tends to ignore the collective wisdom of the participants. When “experts” decide what teachers need, and the teachers must comply, whether they agree or even understand, the result is what the American psychologist, philosopher, and educational reformer John Dewey would have regarded as a form of slavery. He cited Plato’s definition of a slave as “one who accepts from another the purposes which control his conduct.” Dewey held that even where slavery does not exist in any legal sense, it is still found wherever

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people engage in activities that are “socially serviceable, but whose service they do not understand and have no personal interest in” (Dewey 1916, 98).

Dewey asserted that a society is democratic to the extent that it “makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and... secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life.” He went on to say that “such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder” (Dewey 1916, 115).

Unfortunately, many teachers—from Kindergarten to the university—feel their leaders do not respect their opinions or ideas. Too often, decisions that directly affect their work are made without consulting them, making them feel treated like “tall children” rather than professionals (Sadker and Sadker 2005, 9). When the “top” does all the “thinking” and expects the “bottom” to do all the “doing,” it is a kind of slavery. It will cause most teachers to feel resentment, and some may even seek to sabotage plans for change and improvement.

Democratic professional development is of the teachers, by the teachers, and for the teachers. It differs from managerial models, which often have preset agendas and provide what experts think teachers need. Managerial models are often leader-centered while democratic models are participant-centered, fostering collegiality. In democratic models, teachers determine their own needs and construct agendas at the moment of necessity. See Table 1 for a contrastive list of characteristics for managerial versus democratic models.

One simple yet powerful democratic model of professional development comes from the Great Teachers Movement (GTM), which has a long and continually growing track record of success in the United States and Canada. Both authors of this article are active proponents of the GTM, facilitating workshops and retreats for teachers at all levels of education in various disciplines, including the teaching of English to speakers of other languages.

Certainly, the theories, research, and ideas of education experts have great value and contribute much to the improvement of teaching; but experts already have numerous venues for sharing their ideas. Regrettably, some great ideas for improving teaching do not get shared because they are “not big enough” to be the basis for a publication or a conference presentation. In reality, few “experts” on education know as much about the practical issues of teaching and learning as just about any group of teachers who are actively engaged in their profession. The collective knowledge, wisdom, creativity, expertise, and genius of frontline teachers form a vast resource pool that can yield extraordinary results when properly tapped. One of the main purposes of Great Teaching Seminars, Retreats, and Workshops is to tap into that pool by creating opportunities for teachers to participate in “well facilitated shoptalk.” Events based on this model provide a venue for teachers to share their “non-astounding yet valuable ideas” from their own successful experiences and innovations in the classroom and to seek solutions to their own persistent teaching problems through discussion with peers.

### **The Great Teachers Movement and Model**

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Since 1969, when David Gottshall founded it, the GTM has continued to grow and spread across the United States and Canada, and it has been utilized in other parts of the world. It started among community college faculty, but it now includes participation of teachers from every level of education. The model has been applied to seminars, retreats, and workshops on teaching in general, with faculty from different disciplines meeting together to discuss great teaching. Such diversity in background results in a useful cross-fertilization of ideas. The model has also been used effectively for discussions on teaching among faculty within specific disciplines, such as teaching English to speakers of other languages.

The GTM Model for conducting seminars, retreats, and workshops has been characterized as “well facilitated shoptalk” because it draws upon teachers’ knowledge and experience in a relaxed yet effectively guided format. No outside “experts” are invited in to tell teachers how to do their jobs. The participants are the “experts.” The focus of a Great Teaching event is on teachers teaching teachers and celebrating great teaching. Participants don’t have to be great teachers but they share a common interest in becoming great teachers.

Events are often held in retreat-type locations—places that inspire deep thought and self-reflection. A significant amount of free time is allowed for participants to enjoy the location and to become better acquainted with each other. In fact, the “between times” are as important as the meeting times. Some of the most important discussions among participants occur during meals, breaks, and recreation.

A Great Teaching Seminar typically lasts 4 to 7 days, a Retreat is 2 to 3 days, and a Workshop may be held for 1 or 2 hours up to a full day. Before a Great Teaching event, participants are asked to prepare a handout and to bring enough copies to share with all of the facilitators and the other participants. On the handout for a multiple day Seminar or Retreat, they include their name and contact information; a written description of a successful teaching strategy, technique, or activity they have actually used; a written description of a persistent teaching problem or challenge they have not been able to resolve to their satisfaction; a written description of an object lesson, device, tip, or “trick of the trade” they use with their students; and (optional) the bibliographic information and their personal comments about a book or article they have read (not necessarily on an education topic) that has influenced their teaching. During the orientation at the beginning of the event, handouts are distributed to everyone in attendance.

The “facilitated shoptalk” approach of the GTM is effective because it addresses the immediate needs of participants, avoids treating teachers like “tall children,” minimizes time wasted complaining about issues beyond teachers’ control, focuses positively on what teachers have the power to change and improve, and prevents any participant from either holding back from the discussion or dominating it. These things are accomplished by means of three essential components of a Great Teaching event: (1) rigid, minimal structure, (2) excellent facilitators, and (3) highly interactive discussions and activities.

### **1. Rigid, Minimal Structure**

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Gottshall (1999) coined the term “rigid, minimal structure.” It expresses the idea that formal structure during a Great Teaching event should be minimized to only what is necessary, but whatever structure there is should be rigidly applied. The minimalist notion of “less is more” is fundamental to the GTM; for example, less structure = more flexibility. A Great Teaching event has a flexible agenda so that it can be quickly adapted to meet participants’ immediate needs. If a particular activity is not working well for a particular group, the director is free to stop the activity, adapt it as needed, or do something completely different. Although there are very few rules (see Table 2), participants are asked to “rigidly” follow those rules to assure the most effective use of discussion time.

### **2. Excellent Facilitators**

The event director and the small-group facilitators have the primary responsibility for gently and diplomatically enforcing the rules. They must actively listen and take notes, especially on recurring themes and “hot topics” for further discussion at later sessions. Although participants may want facilitators to offer “expert” advice during a discussion, the facilitators’ job is to draw upon the knowledge and expertise of the participants; thus, excellent facilitators refrain from intruding (biting their lips if necessary to keep from commenting). They limit their contribution to such profound statements as “Bob, what do you think of what Susan just said?”

### **3. Highly Interactive Discussions and Activities**

Enrollment for a Great Teaching event is usually limited to around 40 total participants in order to maximize the opportunity for individual interaction. Some activities involve the entire group while others are conducted in small groups with one facilitator and 8 to 10 participants. Small groups are purposefully organized in advance to have the most internal diversity possible based on information participants provide in registering before the event. The coordinator seeks to arrange a balanced mix of participants within each small group, considering gender, total years of teaching experience, and other relevant differences, such as institution and discipline. The information on the handouts prepared by the participants plays a prominent role in the first two small-group discussions as well as in several other activities. Following are brief descriptions of some common activities at a Great Teaching Seminar, Retreat, or Workshop.

**A. Share Teaching Successes.** In small groups, participants take turns briefly describing their successful teaching strategies, techniques, or activities they have actually used to help their students learn. As they present their success stories, they are asked not to read from their own handouts, but the other participants are free to take notes on the handouts. After each participant presents his or her success story, time is provided for discussion, questions, and comments. Depending on the number of participants in each small group, this activity can usually be completed in about 60 minutes.

**B. Discuss Teaching Problems.** In order to promote an open and candid discussion of problems, a sense of trust needs to be established, so before the

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discussion begins, participants should agree to keep these conversations confidential. In small groups, they take turns briefly describing a persistent teaching problem or challenge for which they have not yet found a satisfactory solution. Some participants may have been apprehensive about including their most serious teaching problems in their handouts, so the facilitator may invite anyone who wishes to discuss a different problem from the one in their handout to do so. Care must be taken to assure the discussion does not degenerate into a gripe session. If more than one participant in the small group has a similar problem, their discussion time may be combined to allow a little more time on that problem topic to explore possible solutions. The facilitator must assure that time is divided equitably so that each participant has a turn for his or her problem to be focused upon by the group. Discussing problems requires more time than some other activities, but it can usually be completed in about 90 minutes, depending on the number of participants in the small groups.

**C. Discuss Hot Topics.** Facilitators listen carefully and take notes during the success and problem sessions to identify recurring themes and issues that participants seemed interested in discussing. From their notes, the director and facilitators generate a list of current “hot topics” and present it to all of the participants, who are invited to add other topics they feel may have been overlooked. Participants then vote to determine which topics are the most relevant, timely, and “worthy” of further discussion. Several ad hoc sessions may be organized, depending on the amount of time set aside for “hot topics” at a given event. A few volunteer participants are invited to facilitate the sessions of interest to them. Participants choose whatever sessions they want to attend; and the facilitators of the success and problem sessions are temporarily relieved of duty so they can actively join in the “hot topic” discussions.

**D. Other Teacher-to-Teacher, Idea-Sharing Activities.** Depending on the total amount of time scheduled for the seminar, retreat, or workshop, several other kinds of activities may be included. The following activities are typically shared with an entire group, not in small groups. **Book Talk:** Participants bring and discuss a book or an article that has influenced their teaching. The actual books and articles are placed in a temporary library at the event so that participants can browse the materials. **Object Lesson, Device, Tip, or “Trick of the Trade”:** Participants bring and briefly share a thing, tip, or “trick of the trade” they use in their teaching. **Advice to a New Teacher:** Participants share a bit of advice they would give to a first-year teacher. The least experienced teacher at the event may be asked (in advance) to be the recipient of the advice, taking notes to share with the entire group. **Instant, “Non-Scientific” Poll:** At any time during an event, a participant may ask the group to express their opinions or practices regarding some teaching-related issue by raising their hands (e.g., “By show of hands, how many of you require your students to submit written work in an electronic format?”). **Great Teacher Presentations:** Toward the end of a seminar or retreat, the first small groups (successful strategies) get back together with their facilitator and collaborate for around 60 minutes to create a 5-minute presentation about the characteristics of a great teacher and/or what great teachers do. They may use various items as props

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or create them with materials provided by the event coordinator (e.g., newsprint pads, markers, colored paper, various office supplies, etc.). They give their presentations to the entire group. **Event Wrap-up:** Each participant shares one thing they learned at the event that they plan to use in their teaching.

### **Success Factors of the GTM**

Gottshall (1999) attributes the success of the GTM to the fact that it is truly a “grass-roots” movement with no organization to join, no dues to pay, no headquarters, no officers, owners, or employees—and no politics! No manuals or handbooks or fixed procedures are provided, only a few simple guidelines. The movement is carried forward by enthusiastic people who care about teaching and who want to pursue a quest for the ideal of a great teacher with colleagues in their own geographical area. Gottshall shares his model freely with anyone who wants to participate in the GTM; in fact, he has explicitly stated that his ideas and materials are not copyrighted and may be reproduced and used as needed.

Based on his focus-group research among past participants, Baker (2001) identified ten characteristics that are central to the success of the GTM Model: (1) a sense of self-confidence, renewal, and support; (2) practical ideas for the classroom; (3) teamwork and individual participation; (4) a safe environment for risk-taking; (5) diversity of participants; (6) a format and agenda set by the workshop participants; (7) a retreat atmosphere and relaxed environment; (8) informal time; (9) the length of the workshop; and (10) the graduation ceremony or final presentation activity, depending on the approach followed by the event director.

Smith (1995) explained that a Great Teaching event functions as a learning organization and applies principles of learning communities; and it also incorporates principles of adult, self-directed learning, active learning, and other principles of good practice in higher education. She listed the following key elements of success: (1) open, safe, and supportive environment; (2) excellent facilitation; (3) ample free time and rigid, minimal structure; and (4) sharing ideas.

Professional conferences of national and international organizations often focus on theoretical discussions, research reports, and presentations about major, grant-funded projects. Opportunities are rare for frontline teachers to share simple but very successful ideas to improve teaching or to explore solutions to small but persistent, annoying problems. Great Teaching events are an excellent venue for sharing those practical, “non-astounding” ideas and for seeking solutions to problems in teaching. Participant evaluations after Great Teaching events reveal that as a result of the activities, new teachers realize they are not alone in their problems and frustrations; and they appreciate being able to develop a support system among peers. Veteran teachers on the verge of burnout feel rejuvenated and get excited about teaching again. Most, if not all, participants leave with new ideas they can immediately use to improve teaching.

### **Applying the GTM Model for Teachers of ELLs**

In July, 2005, the first author was a member of a delegation of five American teachers who traveled to Nanjing, China, to provide 15 days of in-service

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training for 120 Chinese primary, middle, and high school teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL). In the mornings, he taught regular classes on language teaching methods; and in the afternoons, he volunteered to direct a 6-day Great EFL Teaching Seminar for half of the teachers followed by another 6-day seminar for the other half.

At the beginning of the two seminars, a cultural difference caused some discomfort for a few of the participants. In China, a junior faculty member would not presume to give advice to a senior faculty member on how to do a better job. Thus, some junior teachers felt uncomfortable sharing their ideas; but as the seminar progressed, they became more comfortable with the GTM Model and format for collaborative discussion. At the conclusion of each seminar, participants were asked to complete a written evaluation of the experience. The results indicated that the majority of Chinese EFL teachers enjoyed having an opportunity to share their ideas and felt they had learned useful things from each other.

While both authors have used the GTM Model in their teacher education courses to promote productive discussions about teaching, the first author has specifically used the model in his Endorsement courses for teaching English as a second language (ESL). As a required service-learning project for a particular course he taught in Summer Semester, 2006, and again in Spring Semester, 2007, his ESL Endorsement students created lesson plans, instructional materials, and provided individual tutoring to children of non-English speaking immigrants in their local communities. The ESL Endorsement students were organized into small groups, where they shared their successful teaching strategies, sought solutions to problems, and discussed “hot topics” related to their projects. Their comments at the conclusion of their projects indicated they felt the GTM activities were beneficial and that they had learned useful things from their discussions with classmates.

The GTM Model can be applied to promote effective discussions about teaching among any group of in-service or pre-service teachers regardless of the subject being taught. It is useful to have participants from different disciplines because it promotes a cross-fertilization of ideas; nevertheless, it is also very productive for participants from the same discipline, such as teaching English to speakers of other languages, to share their successful ideas and to discuss their challenges with each other. Simply following the GTM rules can make any conversation about teaching more meaningful and productive. The first author has also applied the model in “peer teaching circles” at his university, where interested faculty members get together informally several times each semester to discuss teaching. Wherever teachers of ELLs may be, they can form communities of peers and apply principles of the GTM in regular conversations with each other to share their great teaching ideas and to explore solutions to teaching problems.

### **Conclusion**

Managerial models of professional development—where leaders and “enlightened experts” decide what teachers need—may provide valuable ideas to participants for the improvement of teaching and learning; however, democratic models, such as the GTM—where teachers decide for themselves what they need—should play an important role in the overall professional development of teachers.

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“Well facilitated shoptalk,” with teachers teaching teachers, and its practical focus on meeting their immediate needs, is perhaps the highest and most powerful form of professional development in education.

Although participation in a seminar or retreat with teachers from various institutions in a beautiful, thought-inspiring location is the ideal, the GTM Model can be easily adapted to a smaller scale. Some faculty who have participated in Great Teaching events have wanted to promote a community of peers at their own schools, so they have organized “peer teaching circles” among interested colleagues, and they hold regular meetings to discuss teaching. Some peer teaching circles have been formed within subject areas. Others have been formed across subject areas in an effort to pursue the cross-fertilization of ideas generated when the main thing participants have in common is that they teach. Some groups have their meetings over dinner or dessert at each other’s homes. Peer teaching circles can be as formal or informal as the participants choose to make them; nevertheless, participants in effective groups will follow the GTM rules for productive discussions, continuing to share their successful teaching innovations and exploring solutions to their current teaching problems.

For anyone contemplating the idea of conducting a Great Teaching event for teachers of ELLs, it is advisable to attend an existing Great Teaching Seminar or Retreat to experience the model first hand in order to understand how it works. Events based on the GTM Model are regularly held in various locations and at various times throughout the year, mostly in the United States and Canada, but the model has spread to some other countries as well. Both authors have helped other institutions and groups to organize Great Teaching events and trained people to serve as directors, coordinators, and facilitators to support on-going programs. Furthermore, every two years, leaders of various Great Teaching events around the world, and people who want to learn how to do them, get together at the Great Teachers Leadership Colloquium. To learn more about Great Teaching events and the GTM, visit the following web sites:

**<http://ngtm.net>** (Web Niche of the National Great Teachers Movement)

**<http://www.highroadpd.com>** (Highroad Professional Development)

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**Table 1: Managerial vs. Democratic Professional Development**

Managerial Model	Democratic Model
“Experts” decide what teachers need.	Teachers decide what they need.
Well planned, preset agendas.	Flexible agendas constructed on-site.
Delivery of information – broadcast.	Sharing of information – interactive.
Focus on accountability, standards, and testing.	Focus on peer review and collegiality.
Sometimes leaders make teachers feel like “tall children.”	Leaders respect teachers as professionals with a relationship based on mutuality and reciprocity.
The top thinks; the bottom does.	The “top” encourages thinking and action by those who do the work.
Encourages compliance.	Encourages collaboration and partnership.
Puts leader at center.	Puts everybody at center.
Forms hierarchical, vertical linkages.	Forms multidimensional linkages.

**Table 2: Three GTM Rules to Assure Productive Discussions**

<p><b>1. Share Discussion Time Equitably</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No one is allowed to dominate the discussion.</li> <li>• No one is allowed to just listen in without contributing comments and ideas.</li> <li>• A successful discussion depends on the collective wisdom of <i>all</i> participants.</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. Be Positive and Productive</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not whine, gripe, or exchange “horror stories” (competitive griping).</li> <li>• Define and describe problems in as few words as possible (to avoid whining or griping).</li> <li>• Avoid discussing issues such as budgets, administrators, previous preparation of students, and other situations that teachers cannot control and have no power to change.</li> <li>• Every story must have a happy ending, i.e., don’t waste time talking about failed efforts unless the end of the story is about the final achievement of success.</li> <li>• Celebrate great teaching.</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. Mutually Enforce 1 and 2</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitators <i>and</i> participants share the responsibility of assuring that rules are followed.</li> </ul>