

## **Snapshot: Example of Using Feedback for Planning**

The example demonstrates ways that Bowne Foundation Program Officer Anne Lawrence and literacy consultant Suzanne Marten together employ feedback and inquiry processes to gain participant feedback that is useful for strengthening professional-development activities.

Such tweaking – a routine aspect of Bowne program planning – is evident in the following example from the Foundation’s 2011-2012 *Hot Topics in Literacy and Learning Seminar*. Program staff members from eight afterschool programs registered for the semester-long seminar, which included monthly workshop sessions, some in-person and others via an online virtual format.

In their professional development work, Suzanne Marten and Anne Lawrence endeavor to communicate their insights, knowledge, and experiences as effectively as possible and thereby provide a rich, useful learning experience. As part of this effort – and in an ongoing way -- Marten and Lawrence regularly use an *inquiry process* in order to identify issues, collect data, experiment with solutions, and monitor the results.

### Collecting Data

Each month during the seminar, Marten and Lawrence review attendance, engagement, and participant feedback data Lawrence, and reflect on what they learn. In debriefing sessions following each workshop, Marten and note any concerns regarding participation of programs or individuals that merit follow-up. Through individual outreach, they determine whether absences were unavoidable (e.g., family health issues) or related to the program (e.g., technical difficulties signing on to the virtual seminar session). If the latter, the workshop leaders work with the affected programs to seek solutions.

At the end of each session, Marten and Lawrence solicited and received both written and verbal feedback from participants through a variety of formal and informal instruments. Together they reviewed all suggestions as a vital part of their debriefing and planning. At times, participants made specific requests about content, asking, for example, for ways to help older children with reading comprehension or with writing. Others requested help with the seminar technology itself, beginning with how to sign on to the virtual platform. During the sessions themselves, both Lawrence and Marten stressed the interactive nature of feedback, acknowledging and appreciating each suggestion made as well as sharing their planned response.

### Addressing Challenges

During the initial planning, Lawrence and Marten had in fact anticipated challenges based on their previous experience — just the year before -- with online professional development, in that instance, for recipients of Julia Palmer Library Grants. This time around, their *own* inquiry question focused on this challenge: How to establish and maintain a “community of learners” comprised of the participants when using online technology.

### *Rethinking Agendas*

During the first session, Marten distributed a rough agenda for each of the six seminar sessions. Marten and Lawrence considered all agendas as drafts until they reviewed participants' feedback drawn from surveys, evaluation forms, and outreach conversations, and considered professional development content that would best meet participant needs.

For example, the original agenda for the third and final virtual session was to discuss the Common Core Learning Standards. When planning for that session, Program Officer Anne Lawrence asked Marten what she hoped to accomplish. Marten responds that afterschool program staff members need information regarding the school system's new expectations of students, as well as understand how their programs already support the standards. As Lawrence and Marten continue to think together, however, they realize that conditions have changed since the fall – and that many programs had already provided opportunities for staff to attend training on the standards. Moreover, participant evaluation forms consistently request more hands-on activities to do with children.

Based on Lawrence's questioning and the resulting dialogue, both Lawrence and Marten are able to clarify the real issue at hand: How to identify engaging, purposeful hands-on activities that can be done virtually *as well as* make good use of the opportunities offered by the technology. The discussion then turns to what has engaged participants so far (e.g., activities that employ books or writing), ways to support programs to engage children in authentic ways to write about books (e.g., different types of journals), as well as ways to use the WebEx online platform's features both effectively and creatively (e.g., use the IM chat feature for dialogue journals).

By asking questions and referring to collected data, Lawrence initiates a productive dialogue for both rethinking content as well as more effectively meeting participant needs. As a result, the session engages participants in writing personal responses to text, thereby furthering writing skills required by the new standards as well as making effective use of technology.

#### *Hands-On Literacy Activity Using Technology*

*Each of the nine (9) participants is sitting in front of a computer at his or her work site. One participant has phoned in order not to miss the session even though she is at home and without access to a computer.*

*Suzanne Marten partners up the participants, and then introduces a read-aloud selection from Scooter, a chapter book by Vera Williams. Marten explains that the story is about Elana, a girl who has just moved from a house where she lived with both parents into an apartment complex in the city with her mother. Marten reads the chapter that relates Elana's thoughts and actions while she is having a tantrum.*

*Marten stops reading at the point when Elana finds pictures of her father and loudly shouts "I hate you" at her mother, who is down on the street below her window. "I'm going to pause there, and everybody write your partner(s) in the chat feature [of the*

*online technology platform] a response to what I just read.” After several written responses back and forth, Marten leads a discussion about the experience.*

*Jazmin shares first: “I was with Harold. At first I told him that even though the main character was getting upset with her mother, that it was really about her father. I come from a single parent home, and certain things lead to another that you didn’t even know you were feeling. He agreed that ... the anger is about something else. He talked about a child he had in his program who has anger tantrums, and they’ve been working on it and making some progress. That was surprising and interesting to read because I have a child who has anger issues. Even though he gets angry, he does come back and want to talk about it.”*

*Melissa adds: “Leah and I also talked about the same thing, how the tantrums brought out the deeper things. I liked that [you] brought it back to afterschool. I remind staff that kids don’t act out for no good reason, there are always underlying issues. It is important for our staff to understand that.”*

*Harold contributes: “I really liked that the child was processing her feelings while she was writing it -- that writing and expressing it was helping her get over it. Anger is like a poison and she was talking about how it needed to get out of her.”*

*During the following discussion, participants point out that they are able to share very personal responses to the story in this virtual setting, writing one-on-one to a partner. Marten then emphasizes the importance of selecting an appropriate text for engaging students in written dialogue that, like the book  Scooter , inspires a personal response by going beneath the surface of a child’s experience.*

*Upon reflection, participants imagine that their children might enjoy this type of online dialogue journal writing, engaging in written response to text more readily in this format than with pen and paper. This would give their students practice with a critical academic skill without being “more school after school.”*

As a result of the inquiry process – and Marten and Lawrence reviewing participants’ feedback, as well as considering essential literacy skills that could be furthered using WebEx online technology -- they are able to respond to participants’ requests for additional hands-on, children’s literacy activities.