

Thoughts on Staff Development: Anita Archer

Note: In 1994, Dr. Anita Archer, a member of the SIM Trainers' Network and an educational consultant on lesson design and presentation skills, sat down with Jim Knight to discuss her views on staff development. Anita had just spent the day wowing a large group of teachers who had come to hear her speak at The University of Kansas Regents Center, and yet she generously spent an extra two hours of her day sharing her ideas on how she goes about making staff development an engaging, efficient, and effective way to improve teaching practice. This article provides an edited version of that conversation. Anita was thoughtful, provocative, enlightening, and fun, basically her usual self, and she spoke openly about the practice and heart of teacher staff development.

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JK: One of your key ideas seems to be the belief that there should be no dissonance between what you do as a presenter and what you present. Can you explain what you mean by that?

AA: When I go to teach it [provide staff development], there should be no dissonance between how I present it and what I would want teachers to do. So if I want teachers to use active participation, we say answers together, we say answers to partners, we write things down, we use hand signals. Then I will do that as I teach. If I want teachers to monitor, I will monitor. If I want teachers to use, "I do it, we do it, you do it," then they see it all day long, even before we've talked about it.

JK: Is it your perspective that that's typical of staff development?

AA: Oh, no. In fact, I think that would be the opposite of what would happen in staff development, and thus a lot of the power would be lost.

I'll even tell you about my own training. My materials in the past were not necessarily strategic, so I would teach people information, but I wouldn't always put it in a strategic form. And yet, that's what I want them to do with kids. And so, I've had to rewrite everything ...

JK: Can you tell me a bit about how you pick the anecdotes you use during staff development?

AA: Well, first of all, my anecdotes are always real because people know the difference ... so when I tell a "story" ... the story always directly relates to the point, always, always, always ... It's sort of like the research on humor and staff development which shows that humor is useful if it's embedded in the content. If it takes your attention away like a joke would, it's not useful. A story is useful if it takes a point.

And there's where I have a benefit because I continue to teach. I can continue to collect anecdotes, and I actually keep a log. Every day I go and do demonstrations, I write down memorable things. What was the student doing, what was I teaching, and what occurred? And I will use those stories.

Because I teach elementary, middle school, and high school, I have that range too. And that's where some people have more difficulty--the further removed they are from having recently taught in schools, the further they are removed from having anecdotes that they can share.

JK: And what's the value of the anecdote?

AA: Well, I think that first of all, it gives you a way of saying it in a different way, and some people who didn't attend to the straight point, the point on the overhead, the point on their handout, which we've already gone over twice, cue into the anecdote. The anecdote simply is another way of saying the point.

I think there's another element that sometimes we've forgotten and that is that teaching is skills and then teaching is the compassionate and affective, connective part. I can be terrific at the skills, but if I don't connect with your humanness, your personage, there is some of the heart that is missing. And so anecdotes add the heart. And I don't think I've ever said that to anyone, but I think that is true.

JK: Tell me about the kind of relationship you're trying to create with your audience.

AA: Again, my feeling is that everything I do is a model for what they do ... I do what I would want teachers to do. As the people entered today, I greeted them outside and had coffee with them because I look at myself particularly with teachers as an equal. I bring experience, you bring experience, and we will share that experience. And so I greet them; I'm as respectful as I can be in all ways while I teach. I will honor what they already know so that they know I honor them for that. When they leave, I will always go and stand at the door and say good-bye to each of them -- just the respectful things that we would do because we teach people.

JK: Do you find that being the expert gets in the way at all?

AA: Let's talk about what might reduce that distance between the participants and the expert. I think there are many things that will do that. Sharing that my goal is to honor them for what they already do elevates them, which is where they should be anyway. Sharing anecdotes shows that I do what they do ... That I've been there recently. The other thing that [reduces the distance], [is that] I'll make mistakes and readily admit it. "Oh, God, I'm on the wrong page. What page are we on?" ... When you make a mistake and handle it in a non-defensive way, that makes it safer for people and reduces that distance ...

I really do believe that all people have a definite equality of personage, and I will treat them in that way.

JK: What do you do when you're watching teachers during a staff development session--what's going on there?

AA: Monitoring, and that's why I use partner answers so often because if I use partner answers (say design a strategy with your partner), and I come to this group and this group and this group and this group, and they all need assistance, I will say "we're going to need more practice to get this." So I will adjust it [the presentation] predominantly from the feedback of monitoring. That's why I have really moved into using more partner responses because rather than calling on one person ... I can get many other answers, and I can adjust what we're going to do.

JK: What do you say when people tell you that your style is great for you because you're just a super duper personality, but the average person can't pull off what you pull off?

AA: People often say, "Well, I don't have your personality" -- that's how they'll usually frame it. And I will say, "You know if I was quiet, there's still some skills I'd have to use. If I was outgoing, there's still some skills I'd have to use." So, to me, it is not a personality question -- there is a whole range of personalities in terms of teachers -- quiet teachers, outgoing teachers, who are all brilliant teachers. Instead, it is the skills ...

There is another part to it, and that is the human connection. And sometimes people, some very good staff developers who have excellent social skills, simply don't choose to use them when they do staff development. And I always remind people I train in staff development that when people come to a session like this, it is as if they were a guest in your home. And what would you do if they were a guest in your home? You'd greet them. You would show them where the treats are. You would talk to them at break. Don't leave the room. Don't go out. No, no. Talk to them. They are your guests in your home. And what would you do with them during the day? You would interact with them, good. You would call them by name, you would learn their names -- I've probably learned most everybody's name here.

Some people ... they really exclude their being from the people, and this is a very bad choice. So they give them a break, and they sneak out that door, they don't go out there -- they expect the people who organize things to take care of all the details. I don't do that. I get here early, I set everything up, I check out all details. During lunch, I clear out all junk so the room is returned to order. I think most staff developers that you work with have those skills. They just haven't activated them.

JK: What do you think the Center for Research on Learning should focus on to move ahead?

AA: I gave them feedback the week I was there. What I noticed was that the content was well orchestrated, the materials were well orchestrated, the overheads were well orchestrated. [But] some of the people needed more information on delivery so that they would know how to actively involve people ... This parallels the challenges I've seen with people teaching the SIM strategies -- they'll learn the content, but they don't have the delivery skills to get the kids actively engaged while they talk RAP.

How do I engage students? How do I monitor their responses? How do I keep a perky pace? So, it may be what they need to focus on both in terms of staff development and the implementation of the materials.

... But this is a more universal challenge. Let me tell you how universal it is. Last week, I talked to a man who is a podiatrist, and he is on the national podiatrist group who does training for re-certification, and he called me because he said, "You know we have excellent content, excellent overheads, excellent handouts, and it just dies every time." And I said, "Ah, presentation skills," because if you don't have presentation skills, it doesn't matter how good your content is, there's a high probability that the students aren't going to get it.

[Content and presentation skills] really do go together just like design and delivery go together in teaching. Some people have excellent content and no presentation skills, and it goes flat. Some people have excellent presentation skills, unfortunately no content. Our teachers deserve better than that. So, people laugh and joke a lot, but they learn nothing. And it is the marriage of those two [that makes an excellent presentation]. Really, whether I'm teaching a strategy like SCORE [to a group of children] or I am teaching a group of adults, I need to have that happen.

JK: What are some of the principles underlying the way you do staff development?

AA: You know I think that the principles I use are exactly the principles I teach -- that's why it's so easy. So, I want to engage you; I want to have you consistently practice; I want to deliver it in a perky manner so that you'll be alert. I want to monitor you so you see that; I want to plan it so there is an opening, a body, and a close; I want to work towards generalization--write down your best practices, what do you intend to do, raise your hand if you intend to do it.... The principles I use are basically what we know about good instruction that we often leave out in presentations.

And another thing, I'm really intent on people learning. Sometimes we do staff development just because we have to do three hours, just because we have to do a day, without a real intent. I believe that intent drives what we do. If I have an intent that you learn it, and you didn't get it, I'm going to go over that point again; I'm going to come back to it; I'm going to review it; I'm going to give you another example; I'm going to improve on how I teach that ... because the real intent here is that you will use it.