



Living Professional Development

BY ROB SEEMANN

Supportive classmates inspire extraordinary professional development experiences – inside and outside the classroom.

Although I have taught the CDF certificate courses at Clackamas Community College (CCC) near Portland, Oregon, for nearly four years, something different and pretty amazing has taken place with this year's group of students. In the classroom, they have often defied convention and reworked the curriculum in creative ways that held greater meaning for them. As they began to coalesce as a group, they started to take risks, become vulnerable, open up to each others' experiences, and work with candor and nonjudgmental camaraderie.

The power of this classroom experience has propelled my students to start *living* professional development. As their teacher, I've watched with admiration as their learning has helped them gain the strength, confidence, and clarity they needed to develop professionally outside the classroom. None of them expected the CDF training to significantly impact them, yet two-thirds of the way through the year, many of them are reporting that it has changed their lives.

Beyond Professional Validation

In the beginning of every CDF training, I survey students to learn about their motivation for joining the course. Their most common goal is to increase their value to employers and the job market. This year's class was no exception. Student Paul Wheeler explains: "I started with the intent of going through the motions to earn a valuable professional certification that would somehow validate my professional role." Paul soon realized, however, that his classroom experiences were fundamentally changing his career path. "CDF training was not just some experience that I was to absorb and learn how to regurgitate to the masses. It became an all engrossing personal journey."

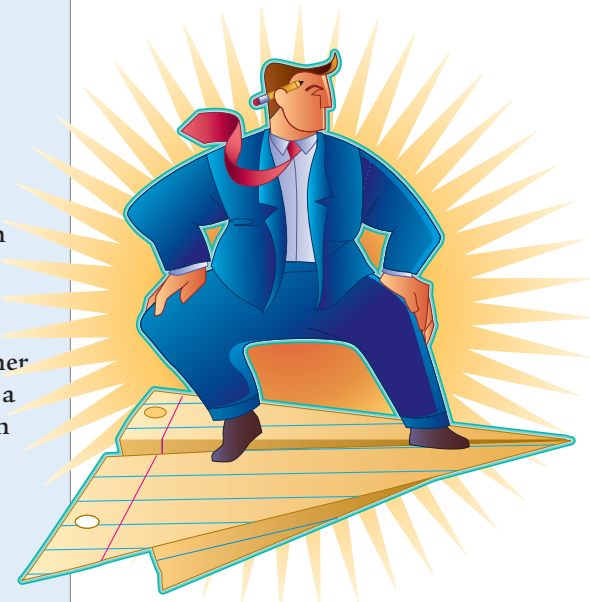
Starting Again and Facing Fears In The Classroom

Jonna Winburn was working as an administrative assistant in Workforce Development Services when she started the CDF training. "I was scared to death to return to school after being out for 23 years, but I forced myself and found it wonderful." One of her assignments was to make a class presentation with another student about a career theorist. She studied hard, swallowed her fear, and pulled off a successful presentation. Afterwards, her co-presenter asked her why she was working as an administrative assistant. "Why are you holding back?" he asked. Empowered by her success in front of the class and her classmate's show of faith, Jonna took the next step and has now been hired as a Workforce Development Specialist. "I figured out what I needed to do to reach my career goal. I found my voice. For once in my life, I feel like I know what I am doing." She now describes her accelerated climb up the career ladder as "phenomenal."

Linda Starr was afraid to be in the classroom, too. "A year ago I was in a career I did not enjoy and the company was cutting everyone's pay. I knew I needed to make a change, but I had no clue what direction to go. As a forty-year-old single mother, I was really nervous about how to go to school and support my family. I thought, 'I'm too old. What if I fail? What if I make the wrong decision?'" On the first day of CDF class, Linda felt overwhelmed. "I was afraid to say anything. I found myself intimidated by the vast experience my classmates have and worried that I was in over my head." Her doubts did not last long, however. "My fellow classmates were very encouraging to me. They treated me as an equal and valued my point of view."

Linda's growing confidence within the classroom empowered her to take risks outside the classroom that have opened the door to entirely new career opportunities. First she began to mentor new students in CCC's Life and Career Options Program. Then she became a teacher's assistant, where she quickly earned the trust of the instructor and was even asked to substitute teach one day. Now she has been hired as a Career Center Assistant.

"I do not believe I would be where I am in my career development if it were not for this CDF course, instructor, and classmates."



Classmates that Care and Listen are Essential

What has fostered such personal growth? Linda's classmate, Mary-Lynne Monroe, has an idea: "One of the inspirational pieces is the sense of safety in the class. I see that coming from the deep respect with which we listen to each other. No one is *talked over* or taken for granted. Everyone's voice is heard. That doesn't always happen in a class setting like this. People generally come with their own agenda, and it often doesn't include listening to and helping each other."

Mary-Lynne has long been a teacher in Portland. "Professional development is second nature to me: monthly book studies, technology integration, behavior management, textbook adoptions, 101 ways to say "no," second language learners, talented and gifted. You name it, I've probably done it." What makes this class different? "The camaraderie and sharing of experience and information is incredible," she writes. "I enjoy professional development presented in this manner: lots of student input, instructor more as a guide or director of learning rather than lecturer, incredible discussions. It's the best course I've ever taken."

Re-Defining What Success Looks Like

Liberty Lacy, a high school marketing and management instructor, repeatedly tells her students to seek out opportunities. Signing up for CDF training allowed her to practice what she preaches. "Learning about the many paths a professional journey can take has given me the courage to slow down and make more time for my husband and daughter." As a result, Liberty has decided to work part time, something she never saw herself doing before the CDF training. "I have been right in telling my students the value of self-awareness, new opportunities, and the benefits of networking, but I know the truth



The instructor and several of his CDF students
front, l to r: Judith Applegate, Instructor Rob Seemann, Paul Wheeler, Joe Momyer
rear: Jonna Winburn, Liberty Lacy, Mary-Lynne Monroe, Linda Starr, Val Wagenknecht

of these ideas in a more profound way now than I ever expected."

Always Something to Learn

As an HR executive, teacher, counselor, and executive coach, Joe Momyer brought to the class decades of professional experience. Why did he decide to earn a CDF certificate? "Our clients and their situations are always unique and in some ways always outside our own personal experience. As a result, if we are going to truly join them as partners in their career development, there will always be new things to learn and insights to gain." Joe's humble and inquisitive nature has endeared him to his classmates and contributed greatly to the safe and respectful cohort that has developed. But what has he received? "When I'm with a client, I frequently sense being "alone" in my role in doing the work one-on-one. At those times, having the warm memories of the stories and shared experiences of my classmates is very welcome and helpful."

Clearly—although they still have one more term to go—these students have already exceeded their original goal to increase their value to employers and the job market. By accepting and valuing each other's personal development, taking responsibility for their own learning inside *and* outside the classroom, and recognizing that they have the power to make a difference in each others' lives, the professional development of the entire class has soared—with extraordinary results.



Rob Seemann is Chair of the NCDA CDF Advisory Council. He is also a community college instructor and educational consultant. CDF students that contributed to this article include Paul Wheeler, Linda Starr, Joe Momyer, Jonna Winburn, Liberty Lacy, and Mary-Lynne Monroe.