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## **Making Connections from Narrative and Experience Classroom Instruction**

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### **Abstract**

Elementary school teachers who work in locations with high levels of rural poverty engaged in summer professional development. As part of this experience they travel from Appalachia to gain understanding about the world outside their community. As part of this experience teacher reflections indicated they had emotional experiences that influenced their decision making. The teachers made personal connections with the places where they visited. These two ideas interact with teacher ideas for future classroom practice.

**Keywords:** in-service, professional development, travel, reflection, peer relations

How did elementary social studies teachers learn through summer in-service? A group of elementary school teachers desired to enhance their content knowledge about a neighboring state and augmented their understanding of their social studies curriculum by traveling for professional development. The teachers learned content during the school year in a two-day teacher in-service and took a week out of their summer to travel across the state. During the two-day in-service teachers worked with a presenter to learn the C3 framework and practice inquiry. Then they traveled to experience the history, culture, geography, and economics of Pennsylvania -- which equated to innovation, landmarks, heroes, and devastation. The teachers traveled from their home in southeastern Ohio to experience both the urban areas of Pittsburgh and Philadelphia along with an exploration the southern transportation corridor along the historic National Road (US 40) and the Lincoln Highway (US 30) before examining the anthracite region of the state.

Teachers visited historic sites, museums, architecture, battlefields, and units of the National Park Service. The teachers disseminated their updated content information in their community. The in-service leaders asked the teachers to provide written reflections at the end of the week-long event to help them understand how this learning adventure helped the teachers. The result was important because it informed other practitioners about how this professional development experience occurred. Teachers also described what they valued from the field trip.

Moreover, teachers used the field trip to model a field trip as an inquiry arc while they gathered information for their students. By using the National Council for the Social Studies College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) framework (2013) teachers collected resources to use in

their classroom. As part of the C3 inquiry arc the teachers participated in each of the steps of questioning, fitting the investigation within a discipline, examining sources, and communicating results.

### **Experience**

The elementary teachers taught first through sixth grade social studies in the three counties that formed an educational service center district in the Appalachian and former coal producing region in southeastern Ohio. The teachers represented five school districts and all the elementary schools in the area. The group members were all white, evangelical Protestant, and ranged from age 30 to 65 years which mirrored the population demographics of the community. The area represented the rural poverty and addiction problems typical of southeastern Ohio. Most of the teachers were born or matured in the area and received teacher licensure from an Appalachian institution.

It was also important for social studies teachers to take some time for professional reflection. Shuttleworth, et. al. (2018) defined reflection as transposing episodes when teachers observed events and contextualized those concepts to transform their instructional practices. The occasion for this occurrence appeared when there was a choice of content or collaboration with a peer. Reflection was not compulsory; teachers performed it on their own volition. The idea of reflection appeared multiple times in elementary social studies, and teachers needed to reflect more to improve their teaching (Levstik et al, 2014; Silva, 2016). Teachers monitored their abilities, knowledge, professional behavior, and skills when they practiced reflection. As teachers learned they needed to find time to think about their personal growth. This self-regulation helped the teacher to evaluate themselves and determine what they should do to improve their performance as part of a teacher in-service program.

There were many possible professional settings where teachers reflected; moreover, the idea of reflection also appeared in elementary social studies professional development. To change educational practices teachers worked to encourage reflection, open communication, and build democratic space which were all important when creating an entire in-service environment. Jensen and Brandi (2018), Brugar and Roberts (2017), Ediger (2014), Morris (2017), Rebar (2012), and Taylor (2019) all called for reflection as part of professional development. As teachers examined their practices they discerned effective strategies that supported their instruction. It took time to build the experience with deep content needed to experience an idea, find value in it, create the disposition to teach the idea, and reflect on the practice. Teachers even reflected on their effectiveness in creating integrative situations for students to learn social studies skills.

Teachers wrote reflections on the question: “How did elementary social studies teachers learn through summer in-service?” Teacher reflections ranged in length from a paragraph to a page of typed text responses. Most of the teachers typed their reflections as they were traveling home the last day of the trip on the charter bus though some people emailed their reflections the

next day. The field studies leaders used the data to understand the nature of the experience for the teachers.

The field trip took teachers to visit the beginning of the French and Indian War, communalists, iron furnaces, utopians, the first federally funded highway, train stations, captains of industry, laborers, twentieth century architecture, and modern factories. In one week, the teachers encountered many of the historical, cultural, and geographical highlights of Pennsylvania through tours and guest speakers as they spent significant amounts of time on location. The teachers learned content that enriched their social studies classrooms, provided information about the history of America, and how people interacted with the land. The teachers learned on site to get an understanding of place and a comparison of Americans in different times and places. Teachers reflected on the content over meals and in conversations on the bus.

Teachers learned about the inquiry arc in two days of teacher in-service prior to the field trip. The teachers had multiple experiences with forming questions, using disciplinary content, examining numerous primary sources, and communicating results. In the in-service the teachers worked with disciplinary content from civics, economics, geography, and history. On the field trip teachers had the opportunity to model the C3 framework as they selected resources for classroom use (NCSS, 2013). The teachers framed questions similar to those they used in the classroom with their students. When teachers used the inquiry arc they, “D1.3-5. Construct arguments using claims and evidence from multiple sources” (NCSS, 2013). These compelling questions investigated problems that endured across time and that each generation addressed for themselves. Teachers considered legal cases, constructed graphs from tables, examined maps, and explored photographs as they learned about disciplinary content. This work prepared them to find and reflect on information while on the field trip.

Specific civics topics, processes of government, and personal interaction with civic participation were included during the in-service. On the field trip teachers compared federal and state government. “D2.Civ.5.3-5. Explain the origins, functions, and structure of different systems of government, including those created by the U.S. and state constitutions” (NCSS, 2013). Most states had some slight variations from their national government. The teachers also learned about individual participation as part of their travels. “D2.Civ.2.3-5. Explain how a democracy relies on people’s responsible participation, and draw implications for how individuals should participate” (NCSS, 2013). Both before and on the field trip teachers worked with civics content. The teachers then built upon the civics material for reflections content.

Similarly, teachers worked with economic content in the two days of in-service prior to traveling. Once on site the teachers had background information that prepared them to gather economics information they brought back to their students. “D2.Eco.2.3-5. Identify positive and negative incentives that influence the decisions people make” (NCSS, 2013). During the two days of in-service prior to leaving on the field trip teachers considered economic consequences that resulted from their decisions. Teachers considered what they needed to jettison in making economic decisions. “D2.Eco.8.3-5. Identify examples of external benefits and costs” (NCSS, 2013). The teachers worked with economic content while on the field trip. They reflected about

the economic decisions they made and what they released to make the choice they desired. Teachers raised questions, examined economics content, considered sources, and shared conclusions.

Teachers worked with geographic content in the two-day teacher in-service prior to the field trip, and once teachers engaged with the field trip they worked with geographic content on location. Teachers used disciplinary knowledge in geography to explore the sites on the field trip. Furthermore, the teachers needed to, “D2.Geo.5.3-5. Explain how the cultural and environmental characteristics of places change over time” (NCSS, 2013). Using the discipline of geography teachers framed problems that continued to provoke discussion; moreover, teachers looked at how weather events and human interaction lead to disaster. Human interactions magnified the effects of some weather events with devastating results. “D2.Geo.9.3-5. Analyze the effects of catastrophic environmental and technological events on human settlements and migration” (NCSS, 2013). Teachers examined photographs and newspaper descriptions as they looked at the land during the field trip to compare then and now. The resulting contrast was pretty remarkable as the teachers saw the changes that occurred over time. Valuable teacher reflection of geographic content occurred on the field trip as a part of the exploration of the site.

Historical content and skills were learned by the teachers in the two-day in-service prior to the field trip. “D2.His.2.3-5. Compare life in specific historical time periods to life today” (NCSS, 2013). Teachers defined questions explored in the field using historic content. “D2.His.12.3-5. Generate questions about multiple historical sources and their relationships to particular historical events and developments” (NCSS, 2013). The teachers used multiple stories to create questions that attracted their attention and other questions that were enduring issues. Teachers gathered information from exhibits, sites, museums, gift shops, and presenters they encountered during their travels. Teachers found stimulation for raising questions from many locations. The teachers examined how people had different interpretations of events, and how they shared those conversations with their students. Multiple sources were also used when teachers examined source materials to inform their questions prior to sharing information. The professional development sessions individually and collectively were trying to impart the idea that there was a larger world beyond their little section of Appalachia, and the teachers were the vehicles who exposed their students to that world.

The teachers composed their thoughts into questions they explored in the field to gather information. Some of these questions were enduring issues that each generation wrestled with to resolve in the context of their time. “D3.3.3-5. Identify evidence that draws information from multiple sources in response to compelling questions” (NCSS, 2013).

### ***Social Studies Driving Reflection***

In studying civics teachers learned the differences in operation between state and federal governments. The Pennsylvania State Capitol was a very popular site since Teddy Roosevelt called it the handsomest statehouse in the land. Participant Dian stated that one of her favorites was, “. . .the Pennsylvania state capitol building. WOW, the majestic beauty of the rotunda and

every room gave the nickname 'palace of art' to this building designed by John Miller Huston.” Moving beyond boosterism participants recognized the significant aesthetic and historical contributions revealed through the structure. Before the project few teachers had any experience with any other state capitols and were not able to compare them. The in-service provided more opportunities for teachers to develop a critical lens in gathering knowledge and seeing things in plain view differently.

A new National Memorial at the site of the Flight 93 impact impressed teachers. Christi said, “I stood in awe of the brave names on the wall of the passengers and crew who tried to take back the flight knowing how it was going to end.” The teachers lived through this experience, remembered what they were doing that day, and recalled the emotions that they connected with that experience. The site provided additional context for their memories and a connection to a direct experience with a real place. This was a favorite location because they knew so much about it. The teachers learned about how individuals participated by taking direct and responsible action.

In economic decision-making teachers examined the good and bad choices that resulted in working with Frank Lloyd Wright. Responses scattered across many different sites on the trip indicating the teachers responded to individual interests and needs. Angela said,

One of the tour highlights would have to be visiting Frank Lloyd Wright’s famous Falling Waters. This is a place that many have heard of and seen here in America. I would say that is one of the most recognizable pieces of American architecture. I had never been and was excited to go.

Before the in-service few of the teachers in the group knew anything about Frank Lloyd Wright and none of the participants had previously visited a Wright structure especially a landmark like Falling Water. Teachers considered external costs and benefits in the construction and maintenance of Falling Water. There were positive and negative incentives that influenced the Kaufman family as they engaged in the construction of Falling Water.

The Johnstown Flood was a story of manmade disaster. The dramatic physical space and the elaborate museum allowed the teachers to explore the scope of the disaster. Aaron said,

The museum provided great . . . [insight] to what caused this incident and the consequences of it. I believe it's one of the most . . . non-talked about catastrophes in American history. I believe the memorial gave great . . . [insight] to how the people of Johnstown were going about their daily lives when it was suddenly taken from them. I believe it is an event that should . . . be taught in the classrooms while discussing dams and how humans alter . . . their environments.

Aaron appreciated the connection between human causation and events that impacted the larger community as one of the aspects he observed in this in-service experience. The teachers observed how the events unfolded seemingly without warning to obliterate their lives. The teachers found the experiences of the in-service important in both their content knowledge and engagement with new places.



Teachers enjoyed the Ghost Tour of Philly because it was their first view of the iconic sites of Philadelphia. Walking the historic streets of the city hearing of the people who once lived and worked in the place, the tour enabled teachers to pinpoint a city's history that was often overlooked. Hannah said:

Another area of this trip that I really enjoyed was our tour of Philadelphia through the Ghost walk. Although I do not believe in ghosts, I do think this is a great way to see the city. The guides take you to many historical landmarks. There were many buildings and landmarks that we got to see that we otherwise would not have had time for.

The in-service provided for contact time with historic places in a less formal experience, and just walking through urban spaces was something distinctive for this group of teachers. In addition, the act of slowing down by walking helped the elementary teachers see the details they missed at a faster pace. The teachers were able to contrast past and present and from multiple events and sources.

The teachers communicated what they learned on the field trip to their students by explaining problems at specific times and locations. The teachers discussed obstacles and invitations for achievements in the lives of the people they encountered. "D4.6.3-5. Draw on disciplinary concepts to explain the challenges people have faced and opportunities they have created, in addressing local, regional, and global problems at various times and places" (NCSS, 2013).

### ***Emotional Connections***

Emotional connection appeared to impact the importance of the peer relationship when learning social studies. It both limited disengagement and enhanced motivation. Taboada Barber, et. al., (2017) reported that students who learned social studies with motivational development demonstrated emotional bonding. Effective teachers influenced the enhancement of motivation and limited disengagement. Group travel for students and teachers was an opportunity to bond as they explored their world. Elementary students enjoyed working with their peers in a social environment to learn social studies during school and after school hours (Giesemann, 2008; McDevitt & Kioussis, 2006). Civics occurred socially which lead to political development. Civic participation while interacting with family and peers meant that democratic participation dispositions occurred long term. The social aspect of education to learn content and skills smoothly transitioned into social studies values and dispositions.

Travel experiences provided the time on site to reflect about professional practice. Females and first-time international travelers were the most likely to travel in the future after an international in-service experience (Slotkin, et. al., 2016). Even past international travelers gained confidence by traveling with a university group to study abroad.

Elementary social studies teachers made connections to the sites that ranged from despair to elation and they equated a site with an emotion. These pleasant memories reflected the full range of the human experience. When teachers reflected on their experiences Crystal said, "While we learned about loss and devastation on this trip, we also learned of innovation and

success . . .” She saw and connected with a variety of sites that communicated powerful stories for her. Teachers described the emotional response they had to visiting particular sites, and they equated some sites with having particularly sad narratives. Jayme described devastation after her visit to the Johnstown Flood site. “Such devastation to the people, land, and the town itself. I could not truly image being in such a devastating natural disaster.” Even after a century it was difficult for the teachers to image the horror of the event. Another type of emotional response was triumph over adversity. Deborah said about the Fight 93 National Memorial, “. . . it also brought back the good feelings of pride and patriotism. The bravery and selflessness the passengers on the flight showed was truly heroic and inspiring.” Whether feeling success or devastation, elementary school teachers felt empathy toward the site and people they encountered through their travels. The bond teachers created with the location was based on strong emotions evoked by the story of the people and events that occurred there. The emotional response to the place was an important part of the experience of visiting the site. Beth elaborated by saying,

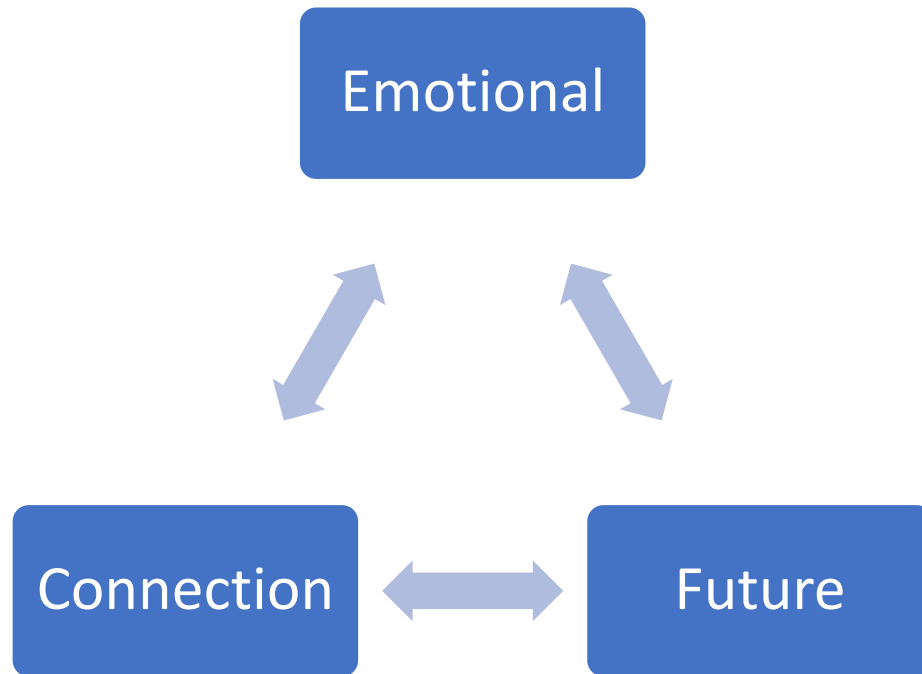
Visiting the sites of the different religious groups and tragic events taught me things I didn't know. In our text books, it is a little bit cut and dry, but seeing it like I did, helped me see the struggles of these people and how they shaped the state, as well as the United States. I have a new perspective to share with children.

The teachers clearly were interested in sharing their findings with their students. Some of their findings were driven by emotional experiences from participating with the events in the field.

Unlike some teacher in-service programs where all the participants were strangers gathered at one central location, the teachers in this program the teachers came from school districts that represented three counties. Multiple teachers came from each school and since the teachers all traveled together as a group they learned together from visiting places during the in-service. Jenny observed, “I treasure the experience as it allows me to collaborate with colleagues from other schools. The collaboration among us is important and has helped to build professional and personal relationships.” Learning with the peer group was very important to the teachers. The teachers found that they based the learning on the relationships they had with each other. Their emotional connections with one another reinforced their understandings of the experienced content.

Traveling together incited a desire for future travels and exploration. Elementary social studies teachers started making plans for future visits to places they particularly enjoyed. Another interesting response from the teachers included the desire to return and visit with family or with their elementary school class. This indicated an ownership of the site that the teachers wished to share their experience with others. The in-service created new desires in the elementary social studies teachers to explore sites in-depth.

Figure 1: Interactions in Connection



### ***Change in Practice?***

Teachers reported that these emotional links and plans lead to a change in practice. Teachers reported that they gained knowledge, experiences, and narratives that they expected to carry into their classrooms. Melissa said:

I will be using nonfiction material *Who was Frank Lloyd Wright* to teach summarizing. I can also make real world connection by talk about a career as architects. I can even incorporate dialect/register in grammar with the missing y on Kentuck and how the Pennsylvanians shorten it. (They also use distinct words like dahntahn – downtown).

The teachers coupled language arts and social studies content in working with their students. Teachers expected to teach about regions when they shared information with their students to help them know more about their world. Teachers also saw classroom applications for their experiences, this included connections between social studies and literature in architecture. Teachers asked their students to describe in words the spaces Frank Lloyd Wright created during the Cold War and how that informed American life.

Content alone did not make for great teaching, but it was particularly difficult to teach from a place of ignorance. To combat this issue some teachers collected visual images to share with their students. Nancy said, “I was able to take pictures that I will use in my classroom to show items from the different cultures . . .” Teachers shared their experiences of people, places, and events with their students. Teachers gathered as many images as they could while traveling. Students profited from the heightened experiences their teachers acquired during the in-service.

Teachers gathered information through the inquiry arc as they examined the events connected to the Johnstown Flood. Teachers asked the question, “Should people have been held

accountable for the devastation of the Johnstown Flood?” The teachers looked at the land, the reservoir, the construction of the dam, the river channel downstream, and the Johnstown cemetery. Through the discipline of geography, the teachers examined how the land magnified the destruction of a flood. Teachers looked at video of the damage, visited the summer resort near the reservoir dam that gave way, inspected exhibits about the causes of the flood, and listened to presenters about the causes of the flood. Teachers took photos, gathered resources from gift shops, and formulated pro and con arguments they used with their students as to whether or not charges should have been brought against the owners of the resort.

### **Discussion**

The teachers from Ohio moved beyond their personal and professional boundaries, discovered new content, and considered how they might share it with their students. It took time to build deep content experiences, make connections, develop significant interactions, discern value in the experience, create the disposition, teach the idea, and ultimately reflect upon it. When the teachers considered the application of knowledge in their classrooms, they engaged in reflection. The variety of new experiences engaged them in multiple opportunities to reflect. The self-regulation of their experiences lead them to evaluate their teaching to determine what to do next to improve their performance.

The teachers reflected without compulsion; therefore, manifesting a level of control to own the experience which was motivating to them. Additionally, teachers reflected on their effectiveness in creating situations for students to learn social studies skills that included emotional connections, learning with a peer group, and inciting a desire for future travel. Teachers engaged in self-study driven by their use of the inquiry arc, and they used the C3 framework to identify questions to explore enduring issues. The teachers examined disciplinary content and investigated sources about the geography of past events. The results of their data retrieval were manifested in experiences, knowledge, and resources they shared with the students in their classrooms.

Teachers explored civic content through field-based inquiry in-service at the Pennsylvania State Capitol and the Flight 93 Memorial. This process allowed the teachers to use multiple sources to construct arguments about the comparative merits of the U.S. and state constitutions. The teachers put forward claims and evidence illustrating why they supported federal or state government as more likely to protect individual rights. Teachers’ conceptions of responsible participation in the shadow of the Flight 93 Memorial was sobering as was the opulence of the Pennsylvania State Capitol and the implications of how individuals participated in the past. The teachers saw how democracy relied on citizens and the functions, origins, and structures of government while remaining responsive to the needs of people in the present.

Teachers continued their in-service exploration by examining economic content at Falling Water, and they identified the positive and negative influences in the ongoing maintenance of the property. Teachers generated multiple questions about Falling Water specifically about how

those needs were met and who contributed those funds. Teachers were influenced by multiple factors that shaped the decisions they made about events and developments. The proprietors of Falling Water used their new relationship with the teachers to solicit contributions beyond the price of admission. Teachers sometimes used historical sources to gather information about particular sites they wished to share with their students.

Furthermore, teachers used their understandings of geography to decipher the events surrounding the precipitation of the Johnstown Flood. Teachers shared with their students the cultural elements and the effects of catastrophic environmental events that lead to the disaster. The teachers analyzed the results of the event on human settlement elimination and out migration from the valley. The place changed over time; in this case the environment washed out a dam and the narrow valley funneled the water into densely inhabited industrial zones. While the dam was not replaced the place has changed over time to erase the powerful wall of water that once swept the floor and walls of the valley.

Finally, teachers looked at history through the perspective of the stories and landmarks featured on a ghost tour in Philadelphia. Teachers compared events in the past to the present to generate questions that examined historical events that involved colonization, revolution, constructing a new republic, or the context of their time. Teachers responded to the stories to identify compelling questions to explain the challenges people faced in disease, injustice, and confinement. Other questions teachers asked required them to use multiple historical sources to understand the evidence needed to draw conclusions from the stories. Teachers drew on historical events to create opportunities to address problems common to the human experience.

### ***Professional Development***

The locations where teachers received professional development shaped the nature of the experience. Teachers practiced inquiry as they learned during field trips for the purpose of in-service. Teachers engaged with other cultures, historical sites, and travel adventures which sometimes reified the teachers' pre-existing biases or expectations (Coughlin, 2010; Ediger, 2014; Kali, et al., 2019; Patterson, 2014). When teachers had significant interactions, it changed their understanding of places and people. Teachers needed time at the place to appreciate the depth of the interaction and form connections. After teachers engaged in deep experiences they reflected on the importance of the situation to describe both the content and their social studies professional development.

Teachers who engaged in professional development that included reflection observed a shift in their attitudes. They engaged in a variety of professional development experiences ranging from video, online, or peer observational. While they enjoyed online professional development as a supplement to regular in-service, educators improved their skills when they engaged in collaborative peer observational experiences. They learned to observe student thinking through classroom interaction, and teacher attitudes on the efficacy of inquiry (Clarke-Vivier & Lee, 2018; Daniels, et. al., 2013; Frazier & Boehm, 2012; Lotter, et. al., 2018; Vogler & Prediger, 2017). Their attitudes about professional development shifted as well as how they

saw their students thinking through problems, and teachers shifted their attitudes about empowering students to engage in inquiry. Instructors worked with their peers to reflect on their practices and changed their minds about the efficacy of instructional practices.

In addition to altering their attitudes, social studies teachers who used reflection in professional development changed their practice, content knowledge, values, and methods through that experience. Teachers who bought into the in-service felt less resistance to change both while implementing a new curriculum and while engaging in classroom research (Bleicher, 2014; Gibson & Brooks, 2012). Teachers played a role in creating their own development through motivation, knowledge, action, and reflection. Within the school culture teacher development supported the needs of teachers by providing active learning experiences, collaboration, and modeling. Teachers used the inquiry arc as they participated in field based professional in-service. Social studies teachers changed their knowledge base, instructional methods, and values when they engaged in reflection based professional development.

The teachers from Ohio experienced professional development that was important to them because it caused them to examine other cultures and changed their understandings of people and locations. Teachers practiced inquiry as they gathered information through field-based inquiry. Sometimes they experienced a shift in their attitudes and considered working with their peers to reexamine the efficacy of instructional practices to change their knowledge base, instructional methods, and values. They created their own meaning from in-service as they constructed their attitudes about motivation, knowledge, action, and reflection. They also created their own professional development culture to support the needs of their peer teachers through active learning experiences, collaboration, and modeling.

The teachers from Ohio found the peer relationships formed to be one of the most important parts of the experience. The emotional engagement was motivating to the teachers who were volunteering time during their summer vacation to learn social studies content. The Ohio teachers developed knowledge and skills about civic ideas which washed into their values and dispositions. The peer engagement they shared motivated them to take risks, gain confidence in traveling, especially to new areas, or return to these locations with their families. As the teachers traveled, they experienced direct contact with cultures, people, and places.

Moreover, the professional development helped them to sharpen their past skills or learn new skills in content experiences. Access, diversity, equality, human rights, and power were challenging concepts to understand without connecting them with meaningful experiences. Professional development for the Ohio teachers was refreshing, cultivated new ground, and opened the door to reflect on their experiences as they took their adventures back to the classrooms.

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