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Using a Study Circle Model to Improve Teacher Confidence and Proficiency in Delivering Pronunciation Instruction in the Classroom

Adult English language learners are hungry for pronunciation instruction that helps them to “crack the code” of speaking intelligible English (Derwing, 2003). Research indicates benefits of pronunciation instruction with adult learners, yet many teachers believe they lack the knowledge and background to make sound instructional decisions (Baker, 2014). This article looks at a professional-development initiative in which 12 practicing adult English language teachers participated in a 5-week study circle on research-informed, integrated pronunciation instruction. The study circle included readings on current research, workshops on teaching strategies and techniques, speech-sample analyses, classroom implementation tasks, and peer observations. Throughout the process, data were gathered including pre- and post-surveys, speech-analysis logs, and a delayed focus group session to evaluate the impact of participation on teaching practices. Findings indicate an increased ability to diagnose and accurately describe pronunciation issues, integrate pronunciation instruction into the existing curriculum and classroom routines, and apply research-informed practices within the classroom.

Careers and educational opportunities in today’s economy require extensive teamwork, strong communication skills, and command of language for engaging meaningfully with others by sharing opinions, elaborating on others’ ideas, or clarifying to overcome breakdowns in communication (Pimentel, 2013). With these communication demands comes the need for adult English

learners (ELs) to acquire intelligible pronunciation, yet from our experience working with programs across the country, few programs for adult immigrant and refugee learners provide focused instruction in pronunciation. Learners come to these classes with differing levels of prior exposure to English as well as varying levels of prior formal schooling (Parrish, 2015). What all of these learners share is a need to thrive personally and professionally in the US, and part of that is becoming intelligible speakers of English. Research indicates that not only do learners express a desire to work on English pronunciation (Derwing, 2003), but lack of attention to pronunciation can lead to discrimination and prevent full access to professional opportunities (Parrish, 2004; Yates, 2011; Zielinski, 2012). Furthermore, research indicates the benefits of direct instruction in pronunciation instruction with adult learners (Thomson & Derwing, 2015). For these reasons, it is critical that we find ways to prepare instructors of adult English as a second language to integrate effective pronunciation instruction in their curricula.

In response to these realities, we were invited to develop a professional-development initiative for practicing adult ESL teachers, using a five-week study circle on research-informed, integrated pronunciation instruction. The study circle included readings on current research, three face-to-face sessions, a workshop on teaching strategies and techniques, speech-sample analyses, classroom implementation tasks, and peer observations. (As part of the initiative, we developed a Pronunciation Study Circle Facilitator's Guide, which is available for free download at <http://atlasabe.org/professional/adult-esl/>.) Throughout the study circle, data were gathered, including pre- and post-surveys, speech-analysis logs, and a delayed focus group session to evaluate the impact of the study circle on teaching practices. We first situate this work in the broader fields of adult education and pronunciation instruction. We then present the rationale for the study circle model for professional development: the steps, tasks, and materials used, along with the rationale behind each. We end with the outcomes and ideas on how to implement this model in other contexts.

Gaps in Teacher Preparation and Knowledge

The context for our work is practicing adult ESL teachers, that is, those working with immigrant and refugee students in a large urban area in the Midwestern US. Teachers represented in this initiative work in large publicly funded adult basic education (ABE) programs as well as small community-based programs. Teachers come to adult ESL instruction for adult immigrant and refugee students with wide-ranging credentials and levels of preparation for addressing the needs

of adult ELs (Crandall, Ingersoll, & Lopez, 2008). Many hold K-12 credentials (Smith & Gillespie, 2007) or in some states, may have no formal teaching credentials (Smith, 2010).

Those teachers who do have an advanced degree in TESOL or other certification in adult education generally have minimal preparation in phonetics, phonology, or pronunciation instruction (Derwing & Munro, 2005; Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011; Gilbert, 2010) and many believe they lack the knowledge and background to make sound instructional decisions in this area (Baker, 2014). Even when teachers have had training or a course in pronunciation, research and materials rarely focus on the learners with whom many of our teachers work: adult immigrants and refugees who have low levels of literacy and who have experienced interrupted or no formal schooling (Chela-Flores, 2001; Darcy, Ewert, & Lidster, 2012; Zielinski & Yates, 2014). In response to this well-documented lack of teacher training, there is a growing call to bridge the gap between research and actual classroom practice (Brinton, 2014).

Why a Study Circle Model?

Ongoing professional development (PD) is far more beneficial than the one-shot workshop (Guskey, 2000). PD activities should be extended over multiple sessions, promote collaboration among teachers, and draw on current research to inform teacher practice (Burt, Peyton, & Schaetzel, 2008; Smith, 2010).

Smith (2016) emphasizes the importance of helping teachers translate research findings into practice and suggests that job-embedded PD can be a powerful means to do so. This job-embedded approach may also allow teachers to take the step of translating newly gained knowledge *about* pronunciation into the contexts and act of *teaching* (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). Study circles provide a means for a group of teachers to explore a topic in depth and relate it to their practice in an ongoing fashion; therefore, a study circle was selected as the model for this state professional-development effort on pronunciation instruction for practicing adult ESL teachers.

The Pronunciation Study Circle

Before the development of this pronunciation study circle, we, as PD experts for our state center, spent significant time facilitating pronunciation workshops, providing classroom demonstrations, and engaging with teachers in observation and feedback sessions. Through such PD events and activities, patterns began to emerge regarding teacher attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs surrounding pronunciation instruction. First and foremost, the patterns showed enthusiasm and

appreciation: enthusiasm as teachers found that teaching pronunciation could be easy, fun, and interactive; ah-ha moments as they realized that pronunciation features, such as word stress and intonation, which are so innate to native English speakers, need to be explicitly taught to ESL learners; and appreciation for being offered long-awaited training on the subject and receiving resources and ideas for the classroom. Consistent with research on levels of teacher preparation for pronunciation instruction (Baker, 2014), participants often commented that our workshops were the first time that they had ever received training on the topic of pronunciation, and they shared their eagerness to get back into their classrooms and try out new pronunciation activities.

While sentiments such as those are wonderful to read, other evaluations indicated teachers' uncertainty in their own ability or expertise in certain areas, such as the diagnosis and prioritization of pronunciation issues, the integration of pronunciation into curricula, and the amount of time that should be devoted to pronunciation instruction. These concerns are reflected in quotes such as this one: *How does one build this into a busy curriculum systematically, and how much repetition tends to be necessary for most students to make progress?*

In addition to limited training in pronunciation instruction, many teachers in our setting held to the myths that have been cited by experts in pronunciation, for example, that their students' pronunciation is fossilized, or that pronunciation lessons are not possible with such diverse groups of learners (Gilbert, 2010; Grant, 2014b). It was clear that teachers needed a more embedded, long-term training that was grounded in research and focused on participant needs, which led us to develop the pronunciation study circle. In 2011, our state PD center developed a study circle for teachers of adult literacy-level learners (Vinogradov, 2012, 2013), which successfully incorporated key recommendations that recent research agrees should be in place for effective PD: (a) a content focus, (b) active learning, (c) coherence, (d) duration, and (e) collective participation (Desimone, 2009). The following sections provide details of our pronunciation study circle, including the objectives, workshop topics, tasks and materials used, and the steps and processes with which they were implemented.

The Objectives of the Study Circle

When developing the objectives of the study circle, we drew on common pronunciation misconceptions and gaps in knowledge that we encountered during our teaching and training careers, and which are also noted by pronunciation experts (Grant, 2014b). The most prominent issues were:

- Teachers had little confidence in setting attainable goals for intelligibility;
- Teachers demonstrated a tendency to focus on phonemic issues to the exclusion of suprasegmentals and phonological phenomena such as epenthesis (adding a sound as in *student*) or deletion (omitting a sound as in *part* for *part*);
- Teachers spent time teaching features with a low functional load (functional load is defined as the measure of the work that two phonemes do in distinguishing utterances such as *back* vs. *pack* or *deal* vs. *dear*) (Munro & Derwing, 2006); e.g., when asked what pronunciation features they already teach, many reported a focus on /θ/ and /ð/;
- Teachers expressed belief in the concept that fossilization is permanent; and
- Teachers were concerned that pronunciation instruction is best delivered in a stand-alone lesson, or that it could not be fit into an already full curriculum.

From the pronunciation misconceptions and gaps in teacher knowledge came the foundation for the study circle: relevant research. We aimed to create strong links between the research, the study circle content, and classroom practices (Smith, 2016), resulting in the objectives shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Pronunciation Study Circle Overall Objectives

-
- Articulate connections between relevant research and effective classroom practices pertaining to pronunciation instruction.
 - Analyze speech samples from current learner populations and identify salient issues; explore techniques and practices for addressing specific pronunciation concerns.
 - Identify and share useful resources such as classroom activities, research, online resources, and classroom practices that can enhance teaching and learning.
 - Articulate rationales for integrating systematic and structured pronunciation instruction for adult ESL classes in order to enhance life-skills or work skills-based curriculum.
 - Prepare to implement/integrate pronunciation techniques and strategies into the classroom through exploration of various resources, discussions, and reflection of teaching practices.
-

Study Circle Components

The following section gives an overview of the various components that comprise the study circle and discusses the purpose of each component, including participant selection, study circle format, selection of readings, and study circle tasks.

Participant Selection. Applications to participate in the pronunciation study circle were completed online through a state ABE website that asked for information about the applicant's students, such as English levels, first language backgrounds, and age ranges. Also included were questions regarding the applicant's challenges concerning pronunciation instruction, current methods, previous pronunciation teacher training, and personal motivation for participating in the study circle. Those applying were required to be employed at an organization within the state ABE system, be able to attend all three meetings, complete five to seven hours of work between meetings, record student speech samples, and conduct an outside teaching observation of a peer.

When reviewing the applications, beyond these requirements we also looked for a thorough and thoughtful answer to the question of personal motivation to participate in the circle. The applicant's previous pronunciation teacher training did not weigh into the decision to accept the person but was rather used as an information-gathering tool. From the pool of 18 applicants, 14 were selected and 12 completed the study circle. They represented a wide range of program types, levels, and learner language backgrounds.

Study Circle Format. The study circle met three times for three hours each over a period of five weeks. Participants were contacted three weeks ahead of the first meeting, at which point they were provided with an overview of the objectives, readings, and tasks that they were required to complete before each meeting. There were two weeks between the first and second meetings and three weeks between the second and third meetings to ensure that the participants had sufficient time to read articles, prepare for discussions, and complete tasks.

Selection of Readings on Current Research. How do we help teachers of adult ELs increase their knowledge of pronunciation and gain the confidence to integrate pronunciation instruction through research that is practical and accessible? Several priorities were considered while choosing the texts for the study circle. It was important that participants gain a basic understanding of pronunciation terms, common concepts, and best practices. We sought research that would dispel common misconceptions, was accessible and not overwhelming, and would translate easily to the classroom.

A remarkable book encompassed all of these needs and became

the central resource for the study circle: *Pronunciation Myths: Applying Second Language Research to Classroom Teaching* (Grant, 2014b). The prologue (Grant, 2014a) was an excellent primer for those unaware of basic pronunciation terms and concepts, and the chapters, written by leading experts in pronunciation theory and practice, addressed the misconceptions and gaps that participants had before joining the study circle while also incorporating classroom-friendly activities and techniques. (See the Appendix for chapters and additional readings used.) Readings were assigned along with guiding questions designed to prompt reflection and connections to the teacher's own practice (all resources are available in the Pronunciation Study Circle Facilitator's Guide).

Study Circle Tasks. The participants were asked to complete and report on a variety of tasks during the study circle, which occurred during both the face-to-face sessions and in their outside practice. When selecting the tasks, we drew heavily on the format that Vinogradov (2012, 2013) created when she developed a study circle for teachers of low-literacy learners, including activities such as choosing specific research-based classroom practices to implement, self-reflections, and peer observations. We also integrated additional tasks specific to needs of pronunciation teachers, including having participants complete a speech-sample analysis and select specific pronunciation features as a focus.

Speech-Sample Analysis

Before the first face-to-face session, participants were asked to record a short speech sample from one of their ESL students. The participants then used the samples to rate their learner's intelligibility, analyze specific pronunciation challenges, and prioritize which challenge or challenges were the most salient. To prepare for this task, participants first viewed several samples and expert analyses from the ESL video series *Pronunciation for Success* (Meyers & Holt, 1998) as a large group. We then showed them several videos of local ESL students, and participants worked with a partner to rate, analyze, and prioritize features. Finally, participants broke into small groups and worked together to analyze the speech samples that they had brought with them. Intelligibility ratings from others in their small groups helped the participants to get a more accurate sense of their own learners' intelligibility.

Activity Implementation

Between the first and the second face-to-face sessions, participants were required to select an activity to try out in their classes

based on the pronunciation feature that they had chosen to focus on. The participants implemented the activity in their classes and completed a reflection form, and then they discussed the effectiveness of the instruction with other participants in the study circle who had chosen to focus on the same feature, enabling them to learn from one another's experiences.

Peer Observation

Between the second and the third face-to-face sessions the participants completed a peer observation with a partner and then returned to the final session and reflected on their experience in small and large groups. Many participants spoke about how much they enjoyed the experience of watching someone else teach and getting feedback on their own pronunciation instruction.

Activities Workshop

To accommodate teachers' needs for concrete activity ideas to use during the activity implementation and peer observation tasks mentioned above, we integrated a workshop into the first face-to-face study circle meeting during which the facilitators demonstrated teaching activities as the participants took on the role of EL learners. During the workshop, we demonstrated activities that focused on common pronunciation challenges, such as voice quality settings, word and sentence stress, intonation, and final consonant deletion. These were enthusiastically received by the participants.

We included small-group discussions with guiding questions periodically throughout the demonstrations to encourage analysis and reflection. The discussion prompts were designed to encourage participants to focus on how to adapt and apply the demonstrated activities in their own teaching contexts. We also included prompts to assist participants in drawing connections between the activities they planned on trying in their classrooms and the systematic instructional approaches recommended in research, which included recognizing the developmental stages of pronunciation feature acquisition (Yates & Zielinski, 2009), integrating pronunciation into existing curricula (Burns, 2006; Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010; Foote et al., 2011; Grant, 2014b), using multiple modalities (Yates & Zielinski, 2009; Zielinski & Yates, 2014), and providing explicit corrective feedback (Derwing & Munro, 2014; Zielinski & Yates, 2014).

Overall, the participants responded very favorably to the research articles, tasks, demonstrations, and group discussions that comprised the study circle. The next section explores the outcomes of the data gathered throughout the study circle process.

Evaluation and Outcomes of the Study Circle

The multiple components of the pronunciation study circle provided participants with a variety of readings, tasks, and opportunities to reflect deeply on their practice. Imperative in any professional-development effort is careful, consistent evaluation of participant outcomes (Guskey, 2000). In addition to using a pre- and post-survey and a final evaluation, we studied the benefits of the study circle model itself in two ways: (a) we conducted a careful analysis of the three language-analysis logs completed by participants, and (b) a researcher who was not one of the trainers conducted a delayed focus group session six weeks after the completion of the study circle (in-depth discussion of results of that study to be published at a later date).

Preliminary Findings That Point to Successes With the Study Circle

Pre- and Post-Survey. Participants completed a pre- and post-survey in which they rated their level of confidence on a 5-point Likert scale in a variety of areas, including their ability to apply research to practice, diagnose issues affecting intelligibility and prioritizing features for instruction, and integrate systematic pronunciation instruction into their ESL classroom lessons and routines. They were also asked about their familiarity with issues around the politics of accent and their ability to advocate for their learners. Survey results indicate an increased level of confidence in all areas, but the areas with the greatest shift (an average increase of 1.75 points or more) in their level of confidence included their: (a) ability to develop tasks and activities for pronunciation instruction; (b) familiarity with issues around the politics of accent; and (c) ability to advocate for pronunciation instruction in the ESL classroom. Other areas that scored 4 or above at the end of the study circle were participants' ability to integrate systematic pronunciation instruction into ESL classroom lessons and routines and their knowledge of how pronunciation instruction overlaps with other areas of English instruction.

We realize that when completing pre-surveys, participants are not fully aware of what they do or do not know and some professional-development providers now ask participants to rate their pre- and post- knowledge at the end of a PD event or initiative. However, an examination of the participants' language-analysis logs and responses from the delayed focus group showed that many of the survey responses were also supported by the other data.

Language-Analysis Logs. Findings from the language-analysis logs were consistent with the survey item "Level of confidence in your ability to evaluate how learners conform to and deviate from the pat-

terns of English stress, rhythm and intonation,” which had an average score of only 1.75 on the five-point Likert scale on the pre-survey, and which moved to an average score of 3.25 for the group as a whole on the post-survey. The analysis of six sets of language logs gathered at three points during the study circle indicate that teachers primarily focused on phonemic issues and consonant deletion, which we believe may have been the most salient for this group’s level of expertise. Many identified suprasegmental issues in their speech samples with very general statements such as “rhythm and intonation, thought groups” without concrete examples from the speech samples they analyzed. One participant did provide several sample utterances and noted them as “very flat, lacking rhythm and intonation.”

Participants were very good at noting final consonant deletion, and for all instances in which deletion was noted, the participants had numerous examples written out in their logs. This is noteworthy since a large number of learners in this area have open-syllable first languages (e.g., Hmong, Burmese, Karen) and we had noted final-consonant deletion as a priority issue. Other phonological phenomena were noted for which participants were not using accurate terms (e.g., epenthesis); rather, they were noting examples in their own words, “The student added an ‘ee’ to the end words,” or “The student added a syllable at the beginning of the word.” We were encouraged by the increasing log entries concerning these issues.

Delayed Focus Group. The delayed focus group took place six weeks after the end of the study circle. Five of the participants took part in the focus group; the remaining seven were unable to contribute because of professional or personal conflicts. Participant responses revealed growth in a number of areas listed below. Representative quotes from the discussion are provided for each area.

- *Promoting Learner Buy-In*
“I told students, ‘Get with a couple other people, you guys figure out where’s the stress, where’s the phrasing. And you could see that they were really getting into it and trying to go through it.’”
- *Learner Awareness/Noticing*
“They’re becoming aware. They are aware. It’s crazy. They’re aware. They’ll recognize it now. I’ll say did you say *no*? Or *nose*? Oh yeah oh *nose*. Just that piece of it is a huge change that regularly now they’ll realize that now they’re not saying that last sound.”
- *Shift From Segmental to Suprasegmental Issues*
“Focus on the stuff that’s going to give them the most bang

for their buck. Not so much the th or the minimal pairs.”

“So it would be focus on those kinds of things [suprasegmentals] rather than focusing on getting rid of the accent or the -ths. See I was a big -th person.”

- *Ability to Prioritize Instruction in Multilingual Classes*

“So finding out what is the area that the majority of my students have a problem with their breakdown in communication, and my class it was the final consonant deletion. So recognizing that as something that will help as many students as possible.”

- *Making Pronunciation Practice a Routine*

“I have scheduled in about 15 minutes every day where I do something with pronunciation.”

“So what I’ve started doing with that is in addition to the vocabulary words learning what they mean, organizing the words by word stress and practicing pronouncing the words correctly.”

- *Appreciation for How Research Informs Practice*

“The research was really a very important foundation that kept it real for me, and vibrant and made me want to continue on.”

“The confidence I have when I talk about this. To have some knowledge behind it.”

Conclusion

For a number of reasons, we feel confident that the pronunciation study circle succeeded in raising adult ESL teachers’ awareness of the importance of integrating pronunciation instruction into curricula. They left feeling more confident about the connections between research and practice; those who participated improved their skills at diagnosing and prioritizing instruction; and as a group, there was a shift to focusing on phonological issues that went beyond discrete segmental features to include such issues as deletion and epenthesis, and suprasegmentals (particularly word stress with new vocabulary and basic sentence stress patterns).

We noted in the focus group that the teachers spoke more about working on building learners’ ability to notice features that were affecting intelligibility and less on specific activities they were using (i.e., apart from the class routines they described). They are still not able to use accurate linguistic terms to talk about what they hear or are working on with the learners, but in the absence of additional course work, we do not find this surprising. We close with a quote from one of the participants that captures the kind of heightened awareness we

were hoping for, and that indicates how profoundly the study circle changed his own thinking:

I was in line at Dairy Queen the other night and asked for a banana malt. The kid behind the screen asked me if I had said banana or vanilla? I immediately thought about a number of things, was it the b and the v? Was it because they are both voiced or was that unvoiced? Was it the identical stress pattern, o0o? Is this what my students experience? Then I realized - I CAN'T TURN THIS OFF!!! Whenever I sit down with a student, since the circle, pronunciation is always foremost on my mind. I pull out a couple of hair binders and we practice stretching the syllables or we practice putting breaks in sentences for thought groups. I have the feeling I am really helping them. Thank you so much for letting me participate; I'm a better teacher because of it.

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Appendix
Topics, Required Readings, and Outside Tasks by Meeting

Meeting One		
<i>Building a strong foundation</i>	<i>Readings/viewing to be completed before meeting</i>	<i>Additional tasks</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get to know the other participants and learn about their students and programs. • Identify proven practices for effective pronunciation instruction. • Articulate key terms related to pronunciation. • Apply diagnostic techniques to learner speech samples to identify the most salient pronunciation issues. • Plan for the remainder of the study circle, including outside tasks, observations, and selected readings. 	<p>Grant, L. (2014). <i>Pronunciation myths: Applying second language research to classroom teaching</i>. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. (Read prologue only for Meeting One.)</p> <p>Derwing, T. M. (2010). Utopian goals for pronunciation teaching. In J. Levis & K. LeVelle (Eds.), <i>Proceedings of the 1st Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching Conference</i> (pp. 24-37). Ames: Iowa State University.</p> <p>Derwing, T. M. (2003). What do ESL students say about their accents? <i>The Canadian Modern Language Review</i>, 59(4), 547-566.</p>	<p>Please video a short speech sample from one of your current learners. Select a learner who exemplifies pronunciation challenges that you see in your classroom. The video should be 1-2 minutes long. Be prepared to share this video in a small group at the first meeting.</p> <p>Please write out brief responses to the Reading Guides for <i>Pronunciation Myths</i> prologue, <i>Utopian Goals</i>, and <i>What Do ESL Students Say?</i> Be prepared to discuss your responses during the first meeting.</p>

Meeting Two		
<i>Narrowing the focus</i>	<i>Readings/viewing to be completed before meeting</i>	<i>Additional tasks</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify a variety of pronunciation-instruction techniques and activities. • Articulate which techniques and activities will have the greatest impact on current population of ESL learners. • Work with a group of colleagues to plan instruction for a specific pronunciation feature. • Confirm dates and times for classroom peer observations. • Align specific activities and/or techniques with best practices identified in the readings. 	<p>Grant, L. (2014). <i>Pronunciation myths: Applying second language research to classroom teaching</i>. (Read Chapters 1 and 2 only for Meeting Two.)</p> <p>Specific article or chapter for selected pronunciation feature. This will be sent out directly after Meeting 1.</p>	<p>Please write out brief responses to the Reading Guides for <i>Pronunciation Myths</i>, Chapters 1 and 2 and be prepared to discuss your responses during the second meeting.</p> <p>Research and select three activities that target your selected pronunciation feature. Select one of the activities to try out with your learners in your classroom. Complete the <i>Classroom Activity Reflection for Meeting Two</i> and be prepared to report back to your group.</p> <p>Bring in an example of a week of lesson plans or a unit of curriculum from your teaching practice.</p>

Meeting Three		
Organization and sustainability	Readings/viewing to be completed before meeting	Additional tasks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report back on classroom peer observations and reflect on which components could be adapted into personal teaching practices. • Integrate systematic instruction of specific pronunciation feature into an existing week or unit plan and explore potential ongoing pronunciation routines. • Draw connections between state content standards (CCRS [and ELP] and TIF) and pronunciation instruction. • Set goals and design a personal action plan for pronunciation instruction beyond the study circle. • Reflect on major take-aways from the study circle. 	<p>Grant, L. (2014). <i>Pronunciation myths: Applying second language research to classroom teaching</i>. (Read the epilogue for Meeting Three.)</p>	<p>Please write out brief responses on the Reading Guide for <i>Pronunciation Myths</i> epilogue and be prepared to discuss your responses during the third meeting.</p> <p>Conduct a peer observation with one other participant in the study circle. Complete the <i>Peer Observation Reflection Form</i>, and bring notes from the <i>Peer Observation Discussion Questions</i> to the final meeting.</p> <p>Bring in an example of a week of lesson plans or a unit of curriculum from your teaching practice.</p>