



The following article by Debbie Smuts, appeared in the Independent Education magazine – 09 June 2011.

The TEACH! Conference, organised and hosted by Kingswood College in Grahamstown in March, was billed as an event to “reinvigorate the foot soldiers in the teaching profession”.

The idea was first mooted at a strategic planning legotla of the Kingswood College Council in 2010, during which meaningful staff development was identified as a top priority. It was felt that the relative isolation of Eastern Cape schools meant that regular access to workshops and training opportunities was costly, and travelling away was difficult for teachers with little spare time. Kingswood’s Head of Studies, Theuns Opperman, was tasked with planning a conference at which teachers could be motivated and inspired, and to make it attractive to other schools – which would then make the whole exercise more cost-effective. In this way, it was felt that Kingswood would address some of its own staff development needs and create an opportunity for other schools to share in the experience.

Teaching old dogs new tricks

And it seems that the conference achieved all it set out to do. Christa Snyman, a teacher from St Andrew’s College, said: “The TEACH! Conference put new life into old bones. As teachers, we so often get bogged down by administration or stuck in our comfort zone by doing things in the same way for however many years. This superbly organised conference really inspired, challenged and taught a few old dogs some new tricks.”

Opperman was thrilled to be able to attract some excellent speakers from Grahamstown and nationally. Professor Wayne Derman, Associate Professor of Sport Science and Sports Medicine at the University of Cape Town (UCT) Sport Science Institute of South Africa, held the conference spellbound on the first day as he shared his experiences as the team doctor for, among others, the South African Paralympics team. He spoke of how to transcend perceived obstacles and attain – and maintain – a focused approach to tasks at hand.

Building on these notions, author and creativity expert Liesl Schoonwinkel reminded delegates that teachers work with many different personality types, who all have different educational needs that needed to be approached with creativity.

Compelling speakers shed new light on familiar topics

The second day of the conference saw two local academics addressing delegates. Counselling psychologist from Rhodes University, Lisl Foss, broached the topic of teacher burnout in her presentation, entitled ‘TEACH! to your strengths’. She spoke of how teachers can be energised by their jobs if they approached things from a strength-based perspective. Professor Hennie van der Mescht from the Rhodes University Education Department asked the question: ‘How do we know that good teaching is happening?’, and shed light on this

topic from various traditional and modern pedagogical perspectives. This was followed by political analyst and former Grahamstonian, Eusebius McKaiser, who related his own experiences as one of the first black pupils in a traditionally white school (Graeme College in Grahamstown).

He focused on those teachers who made a difference in his life, and attempted to isolate the characteristics that made these teachers stand out. It was thought-provoking to hear about the teachers who changed his life and taught him skills that shaped his future. A delegate was heard to comment after this presentation: "It is something all teachers secretly wish a student of theirs will someday do – say that we changed their lives positively. Isn't that why we do this job?"

One of the highlights of the conference was the presentation by futurist and co-founder of TomorrowToday, Barrie Bramley, who gave an overview of the latest trends in social media and then focused on how the use of these media is changing the way students perceive the world and their interaction with it. Snyman said of Bramley's presentation: "It was my favourite of all. Barrie's talk on social networking and what our future in communication will look like made me profoundly aware of the fact that we should embrace the use of these new ways of 'chatting', and incorporate it into learning if we are going to reach the technological genius sitting in the front (or mostly back) row of our classes.

We cannot carry on as teachers putting our heads in the sand, just because we have fallen slightly behind on what is out there. We need to get 'with-it', meet our learners at their level and use social networking and technology to evolve the ways in which we teach and learn. Having said that, we should teach our learners how to engage responsibly with this freedom of knowledge and connectivity that they are so privileged to experience."

A real possibility that TEACH! will become an annual event

Opperman is delighted with the way the conference worked out. "From the feedback received thus far, it has become clear that the TEACH! Conference managed to address a real need for many teachers. The response has been overwhelmingly positive. We have also been heartened by the numbers of teachers who travelled from far afield to attend. A school from Mthatha sent 20 staff members to attend! Because of this positive response, the Kingswood Council has already given the go-ahead for the TEACH!

Conference to become an annual event. We are able to provide a value-for-money conference here in Grahamstown for teachers, and we're hoping that TEACH! will become a brand representing a not-to-be-missed annual event." Opperman has started a Facebook site for the TEACH! Conference and keeps it full of interesting articles on education, parenting, technology and many inspiring readings for teachers.

Anyone can join the site: <https://www.facebook.com/TeachConference>.

Opperman says: "If teachers would like to find more information on the speakers at this past conference or join the conversation about the next conference and what issues should be addressed, they can view the TEACH! Conference page on the Kingswood website www.kingswoodcollege.com. We're already lining up speakers for next year."