CORE
Online Elementary Reading Academy

Pilot Course Evaluation

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Introduction

CORE contracted with Education Development Center (EDC) to develop an online course based on CORE's Elementary Reading Academy. This online course transformed the face-to-face Reading Academy professional development program into a 7-week facilitated, interactive learning experience. The course was piloted with a group of 26 educators starting in January 2016. In addition to developing the online course materials, activities, and resources (adapted from CORE's existing course materials) and co-facilitating the course along with a CORE staff person, EDC conducted an evaluation of the pilot program. This evaluation focused on the following questions:

1. What is the experience of the participants in the online course?
    a. Are participants engaged in the course activities?
    b. Do participants value the readings and materials?
    c. What activities are more or less useful to participants in supporting their learning?
2. What do participants learn from participating in the online course?
    a. Do participants believe the course is meeting their needs?
    b. Do participants demonstrate increased knowledge of literacy and reading in alignment with the online course's learning goals?
    c. How do participants anticipate using what they learned in their future teaching practice?

The evaluation is based upon pre- and post- course survey data from all 26 participants, an interview with course facilitators, and a review of course metrics and activities. This report includes the following sections:

- **Participant Background:** Information about the pilot course participants.
- **Course Experience:** Evaluation findings on the experience of participants using the course, specific course structures and activities, and online professional development (PD) in general.
- **Participant Learning:** Evaluation findings on the learning and outcomes for course participants.
- **Conclusion and Recommendations:** A summary of the evaluation findings and recommendations for course improvements.

Participant Background

The 26 course participants included a large proportion of literacy coaches and reading specialists, in addition to many elementary grade teachers. More than two-thirds of the group had more than 10 years of teaching experience. The facilitator noted that the participants were an exceptional group, in terms of their knowledge and experience coming into the course.

Figure 1. Years of teaching experience (N=26)

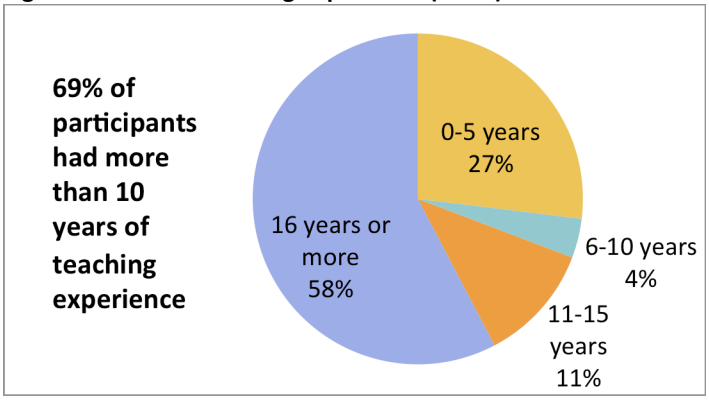


Table 1. Participant roles/positions (N=26)

Position	Number	% Participants
Literacy Coach, Reading Specialist/ Resource Teacher	12	46%
Teacher (Pre-K – Grade 4)	8	31%
Interventionist	2	8%
Teacher (7th Grade Reading)	1	4%
Principal	1	4%
Director of Elementary Learning	1	4%
State Department of Education Leadership Coach	1	4%

In the pre-course survey, participants were asked to share their prior experience with online PD and technology. This provides helpful information to the course facilitators with respect to how much support participants may need as they move through the course, and also provides the evaluation some context as we look at the feedback provided on the course. More than half of the participants indicated that they had "some" or "a great deal" of experience with online PD, and 50% had taken an online facilitated course before
Table 2 and Table 3).

Most of the participants (84%) indicated that they were proficient or expert users of technology (Table 4). The level of experience of the course participants indicated that many of the participants would be able to focus on the specifics of the course content, structure, and activities rather than orienting themselves to the technology and general process of online PD. They would also be able to offer insight into how this PD experience compared with others.

Table 2. Prior experience with online professional development (N=26)

Level of experience with online PD	Number	% Participants
No experience	2	8%
Very little experience	6	23%
Some experience	11	42%
A great deal of experience	7	27%

Table 3. Types of prior online professional development experience (N=26)

Type of experience with online PD	Number	% Participants
I have participated in an online learning community (such as a discussion board or email list)	17	65%
I have taken a facilitated online course	13	50%
I have taken a self-paced, un-facilitated online course	11	42%
I have taken a MOOC (massive open online course)	1	4%

Table 4. Level of experience with technology (N=26)

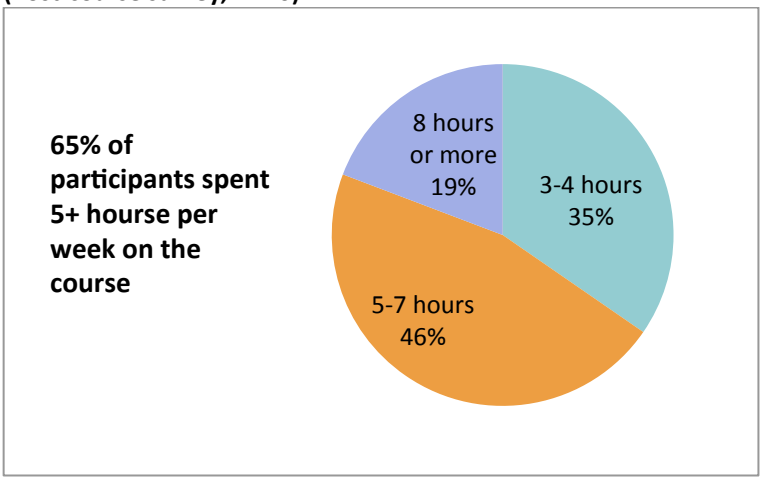
Experience with technology	Number	% Participants
Novice user (I can only find my way with technology when following instructions)	1	4%
Intermediate user (I can use email and basic applications, but if I run into problems, I may not be able to solve them)	3	12%
Proficient user (I feel comfortable using a variety of programs and applications, and can usually solve any problems that arise)	18	69%
Expert user (I feel comfortable using a variety of programs and applications, and I am able to help and guide others in their technology use)	4	15%

Course Experience

In the post-course survey, all of the participants indicated that the course met their expectations, with 19 or 73% indicating that the course "exceeded" their expectations. All but one of the participants indicated that they would recommend the online course to others.

Participants invested a significant amount of time in their course experience. More than half of the participants (15 of 26, or 58%) indicated that the course took more time and/or effort than they had expected, and some participants noted that this was their own choice—that they found the course beneficial and wanted to make the most if it.

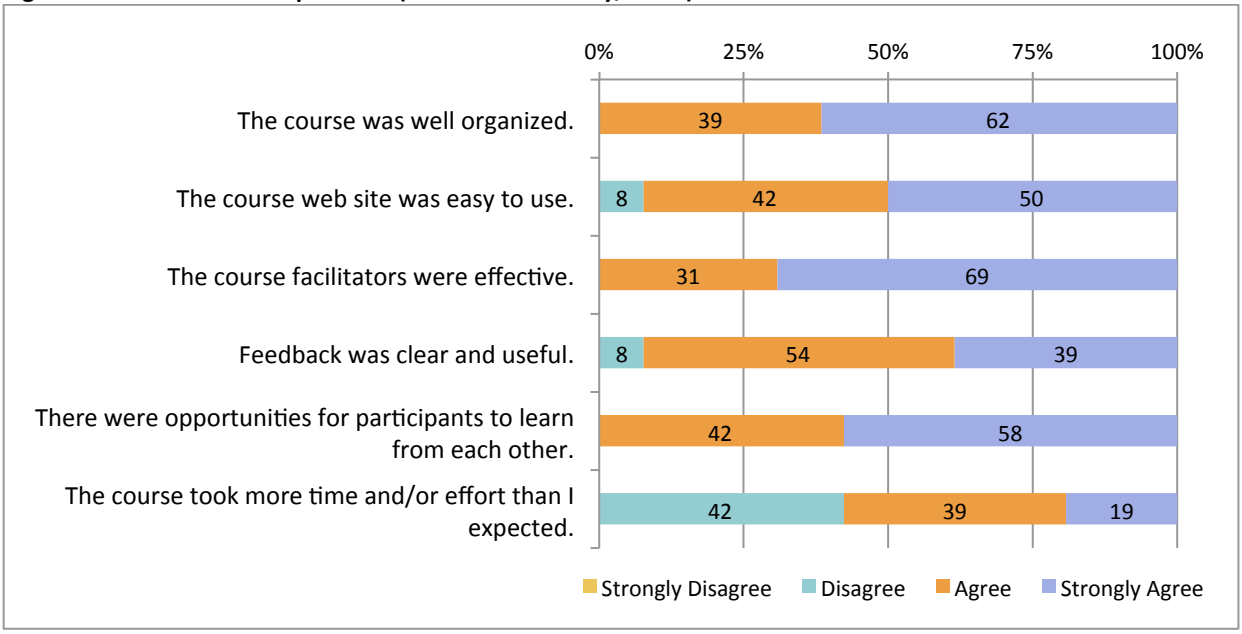
Figure 2. Hours per week spent on course activities (Post-course survey, N=26)



"I expected to spend the projected 5 hours per week on each session, and it could have been done in that amount of time. However, I ended up spending much more time because I was highly engaged in the content. I spent a lot of time exploring the additional resources. Spending more than 5 hours per week was by choice because the information was novel, applicable to my everyday work, and reader friendly."

Overall, participants indicated that the experience of taking the course was positive. All agreed or strongly agreed that the course was well-organized, the course facilitators were effective, and there were opportunities for participants to learn from each other. All but two participants agreed or strongly agreed that the course website was easy to use and that feedback was clear and useful.

Figure 3. Overall course experience (Post-course survey, N=26)



Feedback on activities

The online course included a range of elements—readings, instructional videos as well as videos demonstrating practice, and different types of interactive activities. Several participants commented that the course elements and activities worked well together. The range of activities provided multiple ways to access and process the content, and there were opportunities for participants to practice and engage with the material and with one another.

"The information was wonderful, and many of the activities were a lot of fun AND clarified the information."

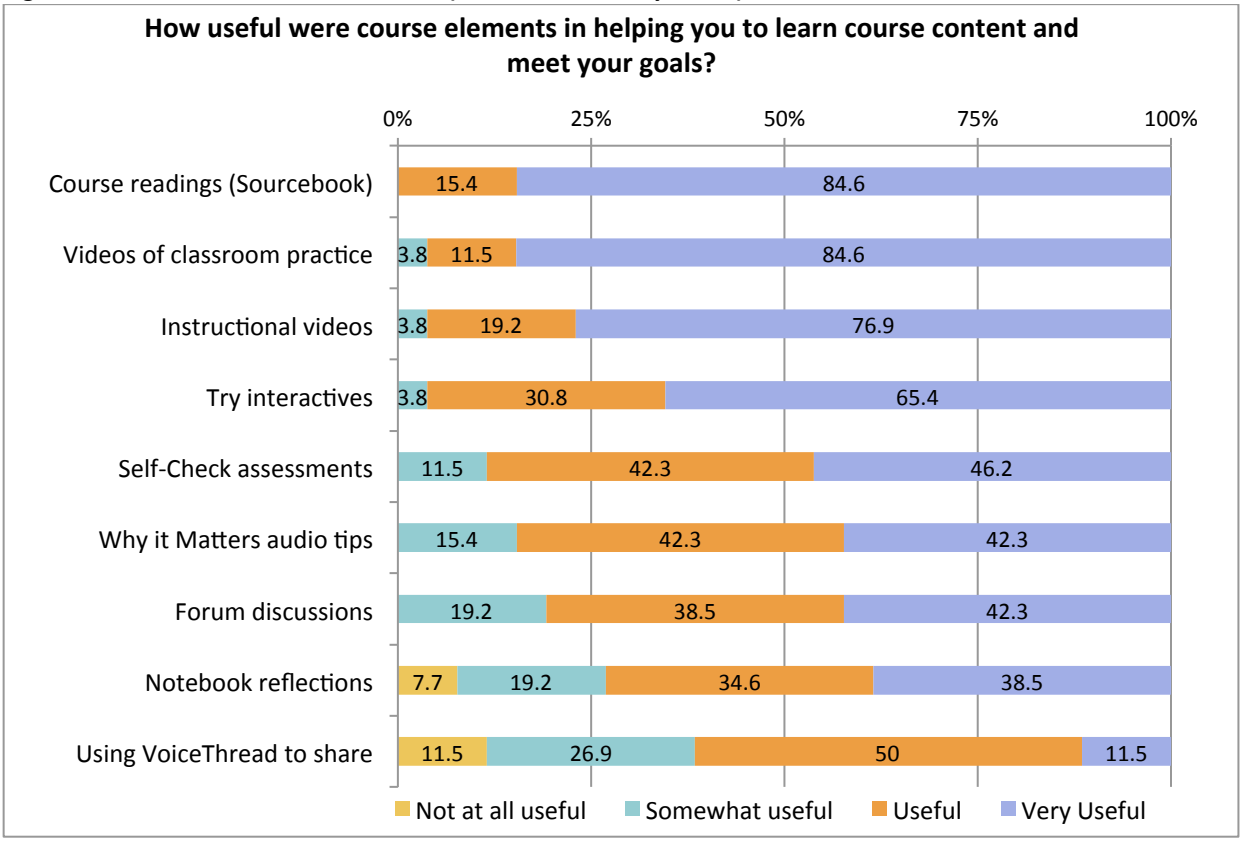
"I like the design of the course - the balance of reading, videos, doing activities, and discussion."

"I thought the videos and the 'try interactives' were excellent! I also thought the self-check assessments tied everything from the session together."

"I found the organization most valuable because it allowed for me to build on different skill sets. Not only did we start from more basic reading ideas and ended with comprehension and assessment, but readings led to videos and discussions. The online course was easy to navigate and made learning more meaningful."

According to participant feedback on the post-course survey, the course readings (the *Teaching Reading Sourcebook*, often referred to as the Sourcebook) were the most useful element of the course. All participants indicated that this was "useful" or "very useful." Videos of classroom practice, instructional videos, and the 'try' interactives were also highly rated with respect to their utility in supporting participants' learning. Only two elements had any participants rate them as "not at all useful": the notebook reflections and using VoiceThread (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Usefulness of course elements (Post-course survey; N=26)



Open-ended questions on the post-course survey allowed participants to provide feedback on the activities, share what they found most valuable, and offer recommendations. Feedback from participants on the various activities, as well as the feedback from the course facilitator, was generally consistent with the ratings above. Below we provide more specific information about some of the course activities.

The Sourcebook: Throughout the open-ended comments, the Sourcebook was regularly cited as being very valuable—a rich, user-friendly resource that participants indicated they would return to regularly in the future. Participants noted this not just when giving feedback on the activities, but also when asked what

> *"What I found the most valuable is the sourcebook... when I received it and saw how massive it was I was taken back. Once I started to work from it, I felt engaged and could understand easily. I enjoyed the strategies given and the side examples."*

they found most valuable and how they would use what they learned in their teaching.

VoiceThread: The one consistent thread of criticism on activities was on the utility of VoiceThread (pun intended). Several participants found it difficult to use—first, it was hard to figure out how to use it, and then when viewing, it was challenging because it could not be re-sized to make it easier to read. The course facilitator also noted that VoiceThread was problematic. Nearly all participants responded via text, forgoing the audio and video options, perhaps making the use of the particular tool unnecessary.

Forum discussions: All of the discussion forums were active, although given the requirement to post multiple times each session, it is difficult to count the number of posts as a metric. Several participants noted the value of the discussion forums as a place to collaborate with and learn from peers. In fact, participants suggested improving the course by making the discussion forum more active and robust. The most frequent suggestion for how to improve the course was to add more discussion questions and/or forums (7 participants mentioned this). There were a number of suggestions that the forums include more than one discussion question—giving participants a choice, or providing questions that built upon one another or carried over in some way from the previous week. One participant noted: *"I found that, because I am not school based, some of the reflection and discussion questions were not as useful to me as if I had been in a classroom. Perhaps having a menu of questions for participants in different roles to choose from might be helpful."* Another suggestions was to have an additional forum open throughout the course where participants could pose their own questions that might not fit neatly in a given week's content.

> *"I appreciated the opportunities to try new things with my students then reflect upon and solicit opinions about the lessons from other teachers in a non-threatening manner."*

> *"I would have preferred several response questions during each session. I learned almost as much from reading the responses than I did from other aspects of the course…There were areas in the reading that were very interesting to me that I didn't have the opportunity to write about and get feedback from my peers. There were also places where I had questions and didn't feel like there was an open forum to pose my individual questions."*

The facilitator noted that in the discussion forum, when someone posts, he or she may not know what additional discussion follows (responses, questions) if they do not take the initiative to re-visit the forum and check. It may be useful to spend time ensuring that participants are aware of Moodle settings and tools for keeping informed of new posts. There was also the suggestion of offering a digest of discussions at the end of the week, or perhaps providing discussion summaries.

Videos: A few participants offered positive comments about the videos embedded in the course. They stated that the videos that showed teachers enacting a strategy were particularly valuable and useful. One participant offered that more of those examples could be nice, and another commented that it would be useful to have access to those videos to use in

professional development with other teachers at his/her school after the course was over. At least one participant commented that some of the videos repeated what was said in the Sourcebook. The course facilitator also noted this fact, and suggested that it would be useful to let participants know when there is duplication, and to make the reading optional for those select modules/instances.

According to the tracking data on the web hosting platform, each of the course videos was played between 22 and 39 times during the course period.[1] The most viewed video was the instruction video *Multisyllabic Decoding*. While videos from Sessions 5 and 6 were viewed slightly less frequently, there was not a large enough difference to indicate a pattern. The least viewed video was the Lesson Model video *Combined Morphemic & Contextual Analysis: Context and Word-Part Cues*; with 22 plays, it appears that not all course participants viewed this video.

Table 5. Number of plays for each course video

Name of Video	Session	Embedded Plays
Instructional Video Series: Multisyllabic Decoding	3	39
Elements of Reading Fluency	3	37
Decoding and Word Recognition	2	36
Introduction to Vocabulary	4	36
Letter Knowledge	1	34
Phonological Awareness	2	34
Using VoiceThread (tutorial)	Orientation	33
Instructional Video Series: Sound-by-Sound Blending	2	32
The Structure of Language	1	31
Instructional Video Series: Reading Decodable Text	2	30
Assessment of Oral Reading Fluency	6	30
Specific Word Instruction	4	29
Get to Know the Course Environment	Orientation	28
LESSON MODEL | Irregular Word Reading: Spell-Out Strategy	2	28
Introduction to Reading Assessment	6	28
LESSON MODEL | Print Awareness: Print Referencing in Shared Storybook Reading	1	27
LESSON MODEL | Phoneme Segmentation and Blending: Say-It-and-Move-It	2	26
Welcome to the CORE Online Elementary Reading Academy	Orientation	25
Instructional Video Series: Continuous Blending	2	25

[1] Statistics were downloaded from the web hosting platform, Vimeo™. An "embedded play" counts the number of times someone pushed the play button on a video, when loading the video from within the course web site (as opposed to the number of times it was played from anywhere, including outside of the course web site). Data were downloaded for the time period of January 5, 2016 to March 5, 2016. Vimeo provides some data on the number of plays vs. the number of finishes (the number of times the video is played all the way through). These data are not available on a per-video basis. Overall data for the time period of the course shows that there were small gaps between the number of plays and number of finishes, but specific counts were not available.

Name of Video	Session	Embedded Plays
Instructional Video Series: Whole Word Blending	2	25
Introduction to Reading Comprehension	5	25
LESSON MODEL | Word Relationships: Word Map	4	24
LESSON MODEL | Combined Morphemic & Contextual Analysis: Context and Word-Part Clues	4	22

Webinar/Video conference: While not included in the list of course elements rated above, the course was planned to include two webinars. The facilitator reported that he found the first webinar useful; it allowed him to model content and he thought the synchronous opportunity to demonstrate and clarify information was well-timed in the course. The second webinar was planned for Session 6, but based on the discussions taking place in the forums, the facilitator decided it was not necessary or useful, and so skipped it. He suggested moving the second webinar earlier to Session 4. One participant did note that s/he found the webinar useful as well: *"I really liked the one group video conference. I would have liked to see several of those voluntary video conference opportunities throughout the session."*

Experience with Online PD

The facilitator shared his perception that the content worked better in the online course format than it did in face-to-face trainings. One key factor was that the online course allowed participants to spend time reading the Sourcebook, which is a rich and informative resource that they don't read as deeply during the in-person training. Over the extended period of the online course, participants had time to grapple with the material and engage in deeper discussions and reflections about it, allowing them to process the information better than in the compressed 5-day workshop model[2]. When the face-to-face training is 5 days in a row, it is a challenge for participants to remain focused or digest the material. The course allowed flexibility in terms of when participants engaged with the material. The facilitator also noted that in the face-to-face training, Day 6 is the assessment, and many people do not participate. With the online course, it is built-in and required and therefore all participants were involved.

The feedback from participants indicates that they had a positive experience with the online course, and in many cases their comments were similar to that of the facilitator. Participants valued the opportunity to spend time with the material when it was convenient for them, and to take a course on something that was so directly applicable to their work. When asked if the experience change their perception of online PD at all, 14 participants (54%) offered comments that indicated that they felt more positively about online PD. Many others (7, or 27%) indicated that they already felt positively about online PD, and this reinforced that feeling. Several people noted that this online course had been the best one they had taken. That said, there was at least one participant who indicated that s/he would have preferred a face-to-face experience,

[2] The face-to-face Reading Academy is offered as a 5-day intensive during the summer, and is also offered during the school year with sessions spread out over a period of time. In reflecting on the difference between the face-to-face and online course, the facilitator focused comparison on the week-long intensive version.

and that the amount of information and activities was challenging to work through independently.

While the experience of the course was largely positive, when asked how to improve the course, the second most common suggestion (after adding forum discussion questions/opportunities) was to extend the length of course. Some participants noted that for some weeks, there was a lot of material and activities to work through. In particular, a couple of participants suggested that the last session could have been broken into two sessions. The facilitator also noted that Session 6 was heavy in terms of material and activities to get through in one week, and gave the group an extra 4+ days to complete the work.

Participant Learning

On the pre-course survey, participants indicated how important each of the course goals was to them and their learning. The most important goals to the participants were: 1) Gain fundamental knowledge of effective reading practices for all learning; and 2) Gain an understanding of how to use the research to inform classroom practice (see Figure 5). All participants indicated that they met or exceeded meeting the first goal (Figure 6), and all but two participants indicated that they met or exceeded meeting the second goal (and the two participants indicated that they partially met the goal).

Figure 5. Importance of course goals (Pre-course survey, N=26)

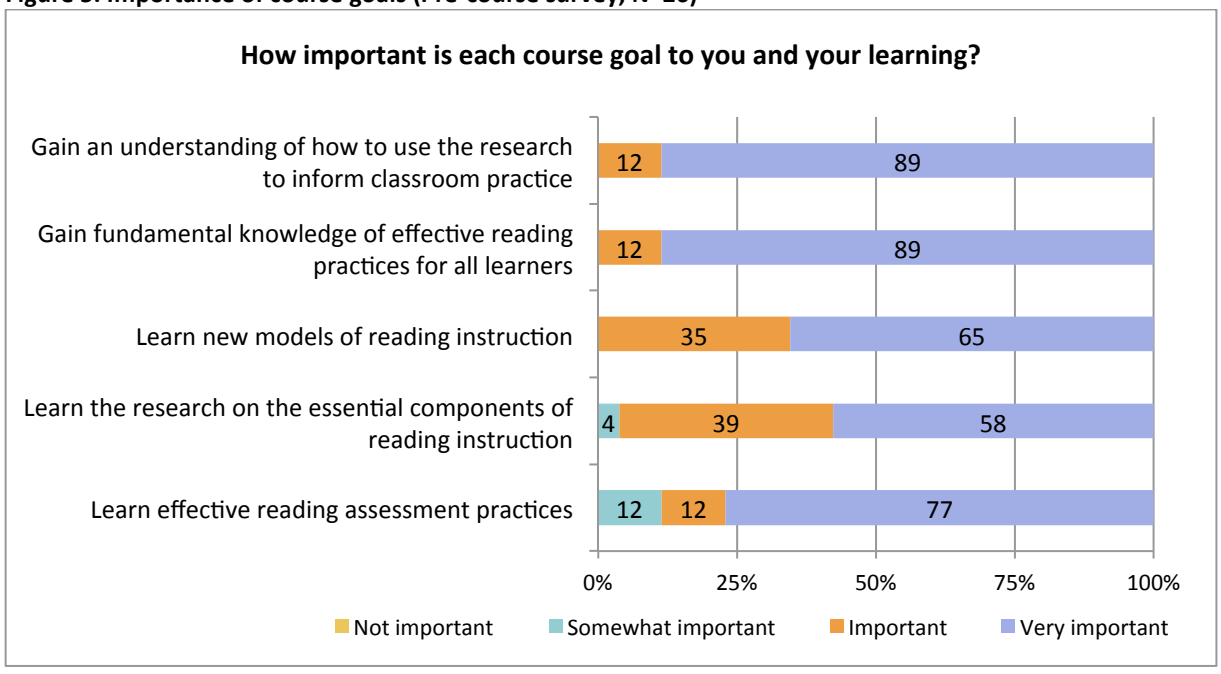
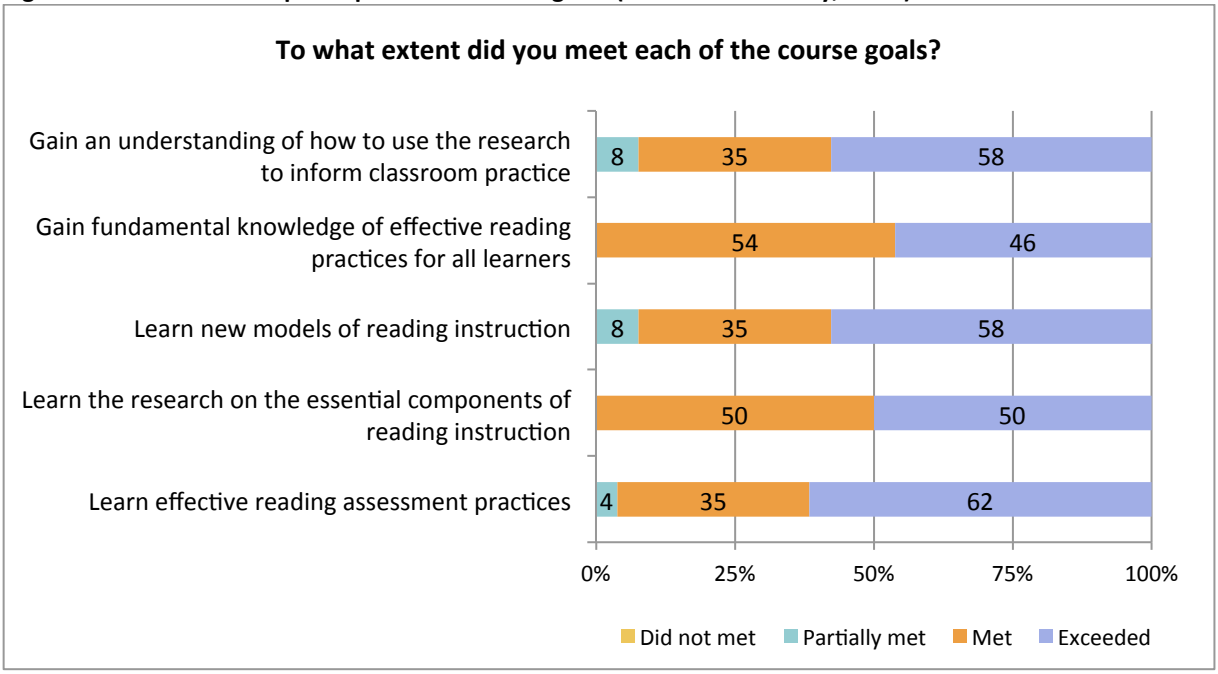
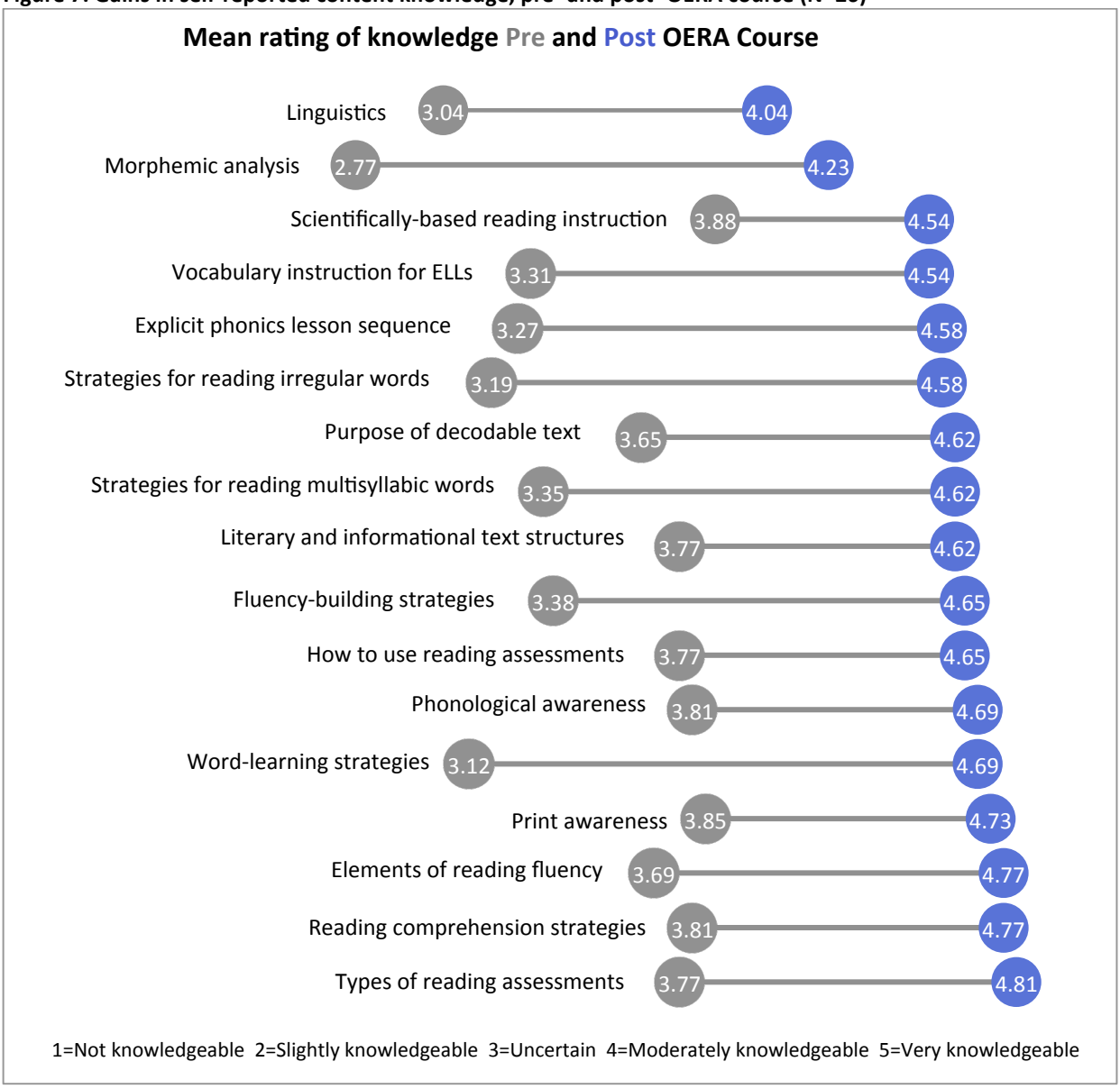


Figure 6. Extent to which participants met course goals (Post-course survey, N=26)



Participants were asked to rate their levels of knowledge on a 5-point scale on the pre-course survey, and then again on the post-course survey. Figure 7 below illustrates the pre- and post-course mean ratings. At the end of the course, the mean for each item was between 4, "moderately knowledgeable," and 5, "very knowledgeable." When comparing the pre- and post- course ratings, participants made statistically significant gains on all of the topics. Ten of the topics had an average gain of 1 point or greater. Not surprisingly, the largest gains appeared in areas where the participants came in with the least knowledge. At the start of the course, participants indicated that they had the least amount of knowledge about *morphemic analysis* and *word-learning strategies*, and those two items had the largest positive change.

Figure 7. Gains in self-reported content knowledge, pre- and post- OERA course (N=26)[3]



[3] Gains for each of the 17 topics were statistically significant ($p<.01$), using a paired sample t-test.

When provided the space to share what they learned from the course and how they might use their learning in the future, many teachers indicated that they believed they would be better reading teachers putting what they learned into practice. Several teachers indicated an eagerness to not only use what they learned themselves, but to share their newly acquired knowledge and strategies with other teachers in their schools and districts.

"My whole outlook about Reading has changed drastically!! I feel much more confident in what I was assigned to do. I feel I am much better at articulating my practice. I believe I can help other teachers. I think they will be able to relate to me after I share my reading struggles as a child and as a teacher struggling to know what to do for my students."

"I am a relatively new Reading Coach (my 2nd year), and I am working with a large group of teachers who feel they do not need to change anything about their practice. We are in a very low performing Title I school with many challenges. Trying to get teachers to look at their Tier I reading instruction, assessment and how to improve those practices is a daunting task. I feel much more knowledgeable about how I might be able to reach more of our less than enthusiastic teachers, so that we can hopefully start seeing the difference it makes for our students!"

"This course has given me the tools I need to assess why a student is struggling and help them to become a better reader."

"This course has given me a deeper understanding of the hows and whys of teaching reading. I feel that I have a better grasp of research based teaching and assessment strategies. Going forward I will be more intentional in my reading instruction and will better utilize assessment data to implement new strategies for both struggling and progressing readers."

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is clear from the level of activity and engagement and the feedback from the course participants and course facilitator that the experience of the participants in the online course was overwhelmingly positive. Participants demonstrated their engagement through the level of activity, including the number of hours they spent each week on the course, and their positive rating of the course experience. Participants also reported learning a lot from the course. Nearly all participants indicated that they met the course goals, and significant gains were made across the board when looking at pre- and post-course ratings of knowledge. Looking at the evaluation data in totem, it appears that CORE's high quality material coupled with the collaborative and interactive environment of the online course developed by ETLO and the course facilitators resulted in an effective professional development experience for those involved.

Going forward, it does appear that there are some small changes that can make the OERA even better. CORE and ETLO may want to work together to consider the following changes.

Course activities:

- Re-evaluate the use of VoiceThread as an interactive element in the course. Given the difficulties in using it, and the fact that participants were not using the multi-media aspects of the tool, it is not clear that it adds value to the course experience. What is the reason to use VoiceThread? Are there other tools that may be more effective?
- Create more discussion questions and/or forums. Participants were interested in having more/different discussion questions as well as a forum that was not explicitly tied to a single session.
- Offer indication when videos repeat information included in the Sourcebook, so participants can choose to read, watch the video, or both.
- Consider adding additional videos that provide examples and demonstrations of strategies in practice.

Course Structure:

- When recruiting, indicate that participants should expect to spend *at least* 5 hours per week on the course.
- Extend the course by one week, and consider splitting Session 6 into two sessions.
- In recruiting participants, consider targeting multiple teachers at a single school. This was a suggestion by one participant, and is also widely considered an approach to effective PD that helps teachers build capacity to carry out what they learn in their classrooms.

> *"I would suggest that at least a couple teachers per school take this course at the same time. That way there can be face-to-face discussions about things. There were a couple other teachers in my district who also took this course with me but we never had time to get together to discuss things and possibly learn more from each other. This is much easier and more realistic to happen if the teacher is somebody you already see every day."*

A final note: The facilitator noted that the participants in the pilot course were an exceptional group, in terms of their knowledge and experience coming into the course. The pilot participant group was made up in large part of literacy coaches, and the facilitator projected that there would likely be a different level of discussion in an online course made up of more classroom teachers. The facilitator anticipated that in that case, there may be more support and instruction required. When asked if he thought the course needed additional content or activities to support less experienced participants, he stated that he did not think that was necessary—that the materials needed were all there. Rather, he expected the additional work would be needed in the facilitation. It will be useful to see how a less experienced or knowledgeable cohort of participants experiences the course as CORE moves forward, and to use that feedback to further refine or modify recruitment, facilitation, and support as needed.