

To the Heart of the Mind: Renewal for North Carolina Teachers

To recognize outstanding teachers, North Carolina offers them an invigorating interlude of personal reflection, intellectual stimulation, and collegial exchange away from their hectic classrooms.

Photographs courtesy of North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching

At the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching (NCCAT), we turn our attention to the *renewal* of teachers rather than to their reform. We do not seek to change people or their work environments, but rather to encourage them to rediscover and nourish their personal and professional strengths—the passion and the intellect that are their strongest allies in the daily business of teaching. Naturally, we hope reform emanates from renewal, but that is the choice and business of others.

The Center

As a unit of the University of North Carolina, NCCAT is part of a major effort in the state to improve the quality of teacher recruitment, education, and professional development. From its location in the Great Smoky Mountains on the campus of Western Carolina University, the center serves outstanding teachers from every section of the Tarheel State, offering them a renewal experience aimed at the heart of the mind rather than at pedagogical proficiency.



Small groups discuss topics in philosophy, psychology, or literature and allow plenty of time for each person's voice to be heard and valued. Here, discussion is led by Center Fellow Jon Rinnander, at left.

"For many participants this is one of the rare times in their teaching careers that they are entrusted with blocks of unstructured professional time to be savored and used solely for their own benefit."

Full-time programming began in the fall of 1986 (after two summers of carefully piloted and assessed programs), and 40 seminars will have been completed by the end of November 1987. NCCAT is funded by the General Assembly of North Carolina, which supports center operations, all teacher expenses (including travel and substitute teacher costs), and the construction of a \$7.3 million new building complex adjacent to the Western Carolina University campus.

To be considered for the program, applicants must be teaching full time in the state and be acknowledged as outstanding members of their profession. Those who are accepted come to Cullowhee in heterogeneous groups of 18 to 20, representing all areas of the state and teaching assignments ranging from kindergarten to advanced

placement history. They plunge into a program designed to provide the three elements of the NCCAT experience: personal refreshment, group cohesion, and intellectual stimulation.

Before they arrive, teachers have completed readings in preparation for the seminar they have selected from among a wide range of themes, including "Pride and Teaching," "Scientists of the Mind: Psychology and Education," and "The Global Community." The detailed schedule (see p. 48) reveals the personal, collegial, and cognitive emphases of a typical seminar, in this case "The Meaning of Literacy." In three or four days the teachers typically become a cohesive, compassionate, and enthusiastic group, where parting is not so much sweet sorrow as a promise to make contact again soon.



The intellectual life is, as Aristotle reminds us, nourished by unburied contemplation and discussion of ideas. Andy Simpson, fifth-grade teacher at Mountain Park Elementary School in Ararat, ponders a point.

The Experience

In reflecting on their time at NCCAT, participants cite the growth they have achieved, the interchange with colleagues across the state, the opportunity to be thoughtful, and, in what is only a seeming contradiction, the chance to be relaxed and at the same time intellectually stimulated. Of course, there are as many variations on the experience as there are participants.

The intellectual life is, as Aristotle reminds us, nourished by unhurried contemplation and discussion of ideas. Lodged in comfortable quarters, given well-prepared meals, and welcomed with a newspaper and fruit basket in each room, our participants are primed to engage in the lively exchange of ideas around a seminar table. Conversations about plate tectonics, Mozart, and cognitive science, as well as the evening concert, are the beginnings of long discussions. When "shop talk" naturally emerges, it too becomes elevated within the nexus of the seminar.

Though discussions of philosophy, psychology, or literature may stress a personal commitment to knowledge and learning, the individual nature of the NCCAT experience comes more strongly from other sources. The small group size invites maximum interaction in the sessions, at meals, and during other activities. There is plenty of time for each person's voice to be heard, and valued.

The organization of the seminar schedule reflects the staff's attentiveness to the needs of the participants. Once the workshop begins, format and content are open for discussion. The staff have instituted a "Response to the Day" period for discussion about revising the schedule in light of the day's events. For example, at a recent seminar on "The Power of Metaphor," the leader deleted one of her presentations to let a participant share his poetry with the group. And "Humans in the Cosmos" was recently interrupted by requests from participants for more information on physics. This dia-

Renewed Awareness, Rekindled Pride

Mary Ella Cameron, an eighth-grade teacher from Smithfield in the Piedmont region of North Carolina, described her experience in attending the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching seminar on "The Power of Metaphor: Uses of the Imagination."

North Carolina has taken a great step toward the nourishment of its teachers. The Center for the Advancement of Teaching is much like a garden that the state has just begun to plant. For four days, the center became the "garden" for 19 teachers who traveled from all regions of the state to a special place at the Western Carolina University campus at Cullowhee.

We arrived on the first day filled with excitement and anticipation, but without a clear idea of just what would happen. We knew that we would be participating in a seminar on literacy led by distinguished scholars in that field, and we each brought our own needs, concerns, and concepts on this issue to the seminar.

As the days progressed, we found ourselves pampered with physical comforts and indulged with culinary delights. Our minds were nourished with an intellectual stimulation that most of us had not experienced since our college days.

Teachers, as a group, are accustomed to giving to others, and to providing for the care and intellectual development of our students. To find ourselves suddenly the recipients of this same kind of care was emotionally overwhelming. For most of us, it was the first time that anyone had publicly acknowledged any appreciation for the charge that we have been given to educate the youth of this state.

Just as plants flourish under watchful attention of the caring gardener, we began to explore mind-stretching concepts, to rethink old ideas, and to consider new ones. We emerged from this seminar charged with a renewed awareness of our commitment to education and with a rekindled pride in our profession. We have been affirmed by the state of North Carolina, and, in return, we will yield an abundant harvest.



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“[Our program] is part of a major effort in the state to improve the quality of teacher recruitment, education, and professional development.”



Once a workshop begins, discussion takes its own unexpected turns. Pictured here is Lillian B. Stokes, sixth-grade math teacher at Sampson Middle School. Pictured above is Madison Hall, temporary quarters for the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching, on the Western Carolina University campus.



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logue provided the impetus for a teacher-initiated research group that is independently investigating the nature of literacy in the physical sciences and planning a follow-up seminar. Shared authority over the nature and direction of the learning experience has only enhanced each seminar.

Interspersed throughout each seminar are large chunks of free time for independent study, reflection, and relaxation. For teachers used to a hectic school day, such interludes are cherished. Often, discussion of the seminar topic will spill out to the rocking chairs on the porch of Madison Hall. For many participants this is one of the rare times in their teaching careers that they are entrusted with blocks of unstructured professional time to be savored and used solely for their own benefit.

From Practice to Theory

Most of our participants find themselves at least halfway in life's wood. Our theory in developing programs for them is based on certain key assumptions. We believe, for example, that they already possess what Lee Shulman (1986, 1987) has called the "wisdom of practice." They have advanced skills not only in communicating their thoughts and emotions, but also in adjusting that communication to the level of understanding of their audience. Thus, we create the conditions for the teachers first to realize this truth and then—with joy, energy, and collegial spirit—to act upon it.

The experience of our first year has led us to deemphasize the role of the visiting expert, particularly those who ask in advance for lecterns. We have posited instead, and found by trial and error, a bread-baking kind of presenter who mixes, pounds, and shapes, but also has the sense to stand back and let a discussion take its own unexpected turns.

What evolves is the validation of a seemingly new theory of the education professional: one who shares leadership, openly admits mistakes, and seeks to draw on the energies that free persons can give to uncoerced

"The Meaning of Literacy" Seminar—Schedule of Events

Wednesday

- 12:00–3:00 p.m. Registration and settling in
 3:30–4:00 p.m. Campus tour
 4:15–5:30 p.m. Introduction to the center—Bruce McPherson
 6:00–7:15 p.m. Dinner
 7:30–9:00 p.m. Seminar orientation and overview—Bruce McPherson, Tim Shanahan
 Reception
 9:00 p.m.—

Thursday

- 7:00–7:45 a.m. Aerobics, walking, jogging, biking
 8:00–8:45 a.m. Breakfast
 9:00–10:30 a.m. "Measurement of Literacy: A New Perspective"—Irwin Kirsch
 10:30–11:00 a.m. Break/Group photo
 11:00–11:45 a.m. Discussion with Irwin Kirsch
 12:00–1:00 p.m. Lunch
 1:30–3:30 p.m. "Interview: Literacy Teachers and Their Adult Students"
 3:30–5:30 p.m. Local excursion
 5:30 p.m. Board bus for dinner—Hunter's Restaurant in Franklin
 8:00–8:30 p.m. Response to the Day
 8:30 p.m.— Film: "The Never Ending Story"

Friday

- 7:00–7:45 a.m. Aerobics, walking, jogging, biking
 8:00–8:45 a.m. Breakfast
 9:00–10:30 a.m. "The Consequences of Literacy"—David Olson
 10:30–10:45 a.m. Break
 10:45–11:30 a.m. Discussion with David Olson
 11:45–12:30 p.m. Visit to new NCCAT site
 12:30–1:30 p.m. Lunch on the verandah, Madison Hall
 1:30–3:00 p.m. "The Social Meanings of Literacy"—Boyd Davis
 3:00–3:15 p.m. Break
 3:30–4:30 p.m. "Planning the Literacy Tour"—Boyd Davis and Tim Shanahan
 4:30–5:00 p.m. Response to the Day
 6:00–8:00 p.m. Community Kitchen: Taco Dinner
 Songs by Steve Weams
 9:00 p.m.— "At a Loss for Words" (ABC/Peter Jennings video on illiteracy)

Saturday

- 7:00–7:45 a.m. Aerobics, walking, jogging, biking
 8:00–8:45 a.m. Breakfast
 9:00–12:00 p.m. "Literacy Tour"
 12:00–1:00 p.m. Lunch
 1:30–3:30 p.m. "Literacy Tour: Discussion and Sharing"
 3:30–3:45 p.m. Break
 3:45–5:45 p.m. "Schooling and Literacy"—Tim Shanahan
 Dinner, Mary Will Mitchell Room, Brown Cafeteria
 6:00–7:30 p.m. Mountain music with the Holberts
 8:00 p.m. "Sharing Books That Are Important in Our Lives"
 9:00 p.m.

Sunday

- 8:00–10:30 a.m. Continental breakfast
 Evaluation: Written and oral
 Expense forms
 Good-byes
 10:45 a.m. Bus departs for airport

learning. Ironically, this model is not new. It is found in theorists as diverse as Pestalozzi and Dewey, and it is known to most of the primary teachers who come to NCCAT and are delighted to discover that they speak in their classrooms the very language we are speaking to them.

The components of our theory are necessarily eclectic, but they include: a respect for the unique private history (personal and professional) of each participating teacher; a belief that sharing those histories blends personal commitment into a new "corporate identity"; and the celebration of the

elusiveness of discursive intellect. We draw heavily on *Lectures on Aesthetic Education* (Schiller 1801) and *Philosophy in a New Key* (Langer 1957) as a validation of the aesthetic as a unique mode of knowing.

By remarkable consensus, we have placed to one side many of the features that make contemporary American educational theory a footnote to positivism. We draw more on the well-springs of European and American culture, from institutions as far apart as the classical German gymnasium curriculum and the camp meeting.

We teach knowledge as evolving, learning as a process of constant re-education and self-renewal, and collegiality as a corrective to the bias and presumption that age, sex, race, and prior education might give to a participant or presenter. We draw our ontology from Whitehead (1929), our epistemology from the pragmatists.

Our constant self-correction is based on the precepts that each person counts, that particularity is necessary to teaching. Our collectivity is organic, a yeasty ferment of sprightly individuals. To the delight of all, our teachers take back to their classrooms more than sheer content; they return with a nonhierarchical model of group learning. □

References

- Langer, S. *Philosophy in a New Key*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957.
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 Shulman, L. "Those Who Understand: Knowledge Growth in Teaching." *Educational Researcher* 15, 2 (February 1986): 4–14.
 Shulman, L. In L. Olson, "Wisdom of Practice Studies Are Providing Key Perspective on Teaching." *Education Week* 6, 28 (8 April 1987): 19.
 Whitehead, A. *Process and Reality*. New York: Free Press, 1929.

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