

---

The Spirit and Intent  
of the  
National Great Teachers Movement

(In observance of its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary)

By David B. Gottshall  
Founder

March 1999

---

## Introduction

In 1969, I founded the National Great Teachers Seminar (known originally as the Illinois Great Teachers Seminar), based on earlier staff development experiments of the late Roger H. Garrison. Over the years, the Great Teachers model has spread to many states and provinces across North America, and the original National Great Teachers Seminar was discontinued after 25 continuous, successful years.

As the statewide and province-wide Great Teachers Seminars develop, the Movement is carried by those participants to their own local colleges. Once the Great Teachers concept takes hold at the local level it becomes the model for a variety of grass roots staff and organizational development activities that are both immensely effective and extremely cost-effective.

It is remarkable that a movement in education has thrived and continues to grow for 30 years. However, due to its age and the ever-growing distances from its Midwest point of origin, it is time to clarify its simple purposes and methods, so that it will continue to serve higher education through its positive effect on the professional and personal lives of our future teachers.

What follows is not a how-to document; I sincerely believe that the continuance of the Great Teachers Movement depends upon there being no such document, as I will explain later in the text. I do hope, however, that those who venture into Great Teachers leadership will do so with a clearer picture of the spirit and intent of the Movement, having read this document.

## Purposes and Premises of the Great Teachers Seminars

The specific purposes of the Great Teachers Seminars stated in the many annual announcement fliers have remained basically unchanged since the original Illinois Great Teachers Seminar in 1969.

- 1) To celebrate good teaching.
- 2) To cause educators to venture beyond the limits of their own specializations and environments in search of transferable ideas and the universals of teaching.
- 3) To promote an attitude of introspection and self-appraisal by providing a relaxed setting and straightforward process whereby participants can seriously review and contemplate their attitude, methods, and behavior as teachers.
- 4) To practice rational analysis of instructional problems and to develop realistic, creative approaches to their solution.
- 5) To stimulate the exchange of information and ideas by building an expanding network of communication among teachers in higher education.

The Great Teachers Seminars are based on four premises.

- 1) In the long run, teachers learn to teach best from one another. Properly facilitated shop talk can be the highest form of staff development.
- 2) Creativity in teaching is enhanced by mixing teachers of diverse fields, experience levels, and interests.
- 3) If properly tapped, the collective wisdom, experience and creativity of any group of practicing educators far surpasses that of any individual expert of any stature or fame.
- 4) The key to success in teaching is simplification (less is more).

The focus of the seminar is not on the teaching of specific fields, but rather on the art of teaching as such. The emphasis is on the nature of a great teacher. It is a quest for The Great Teacher, and, as in the case of any quest, the questers learn much about themselves.

## The Great Teachers *Movement*

The Great Teachers Movement is called a movement because it is not associated with, nor does it constitute a corporation or an organization of any kind. Thus, it serves no institutional or commercial interests. There is no headquarters or address, and there are no officials, owners, employees or politics. There are no manuals or handbooks, only a few simple guidelines. Everything is passed on by oral tradition in order to prevent the development of any form of true-believership or fixed procedure that might come to be followed to the letter and of which the education professional would soon tire. The many annual Great Teachers Seminars throughout North America exist and persist only because of the initiative and selfless ambition of people who want to share the experience with teachers in their own geographic area.

The above paragraph is the most important paragraph in this document. It explains the success of the movement of the past 30 years. It needs to be understood by all who use the Great Teachers model and who venture into the Great Teachers Movement if it is to survive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Distinctive Features of a Great Teachers Seminar

In order to “qualify” as a Great Teachers Seminar, an event must be based on the purposes and premises stated above and must display the following features.

There is no pre-planned agenda. For the purposes of the seminar, the best agendas are those that are written at the last possible moment. They are based on the actual needs and interests of those assembled. In the case of the GT Model, the agenda develops out of the discussion of two brief papers written by the participants before they arrive. These papers feature a teaching innovation of which they are proud and a teaching problem for which they have not yet found a satisfactory solution. There is no input whatsoever into the agenda on the part of the director or the facilitators of the seminar. The agenda is derived from what the facilitators hear and observe in their small group sessions. There should be no inkling of the content of a Great Teachers Seminar before it begins.

There is no pre-planned, distributed schedule. The trouble with schedules is that, once they are announced, one must stick to them or one appears “out of control”. Thus, there is no room for alteration of any sort or merit. If something useful comes up, it must be rejected. If something goes on too long or should be savored longer or turns out to be pointless, nothing can be done about it. Change becomes a sign of inability to adhere to the schedule. The more you succeed in facilitating good process, the more you “fail”. A tentative and flexible listing of events indicating what has developed by way of a plan for the next several hours should be posted at some central place.

There are no hired experts on education or anything else on hand. The whole idea is to demonstrate the power of the collective wisdom, experience and creativity of the participants. It is one of the most important concepts that they bring back to their campuses.

There is an agreement at the very outset of the seminar that all behavior and discussion will be positive and productive. There is no occasion for griping, telling

war stories, crucifying administrators or scapegoating of any sort. There is no room for bad news; only good news is acceptable. No one cares what does not work; everyone cares what does work. The question is always: "What will I do?" It is never: "What should someone else do?" All agree to share discussion time equitably and to be graciously honest and straightforward.

There is a significant amount of "free" time. The amount and timing of free time is very important and variable. It is provided to allow for further discussion, informal follow-up, and private reflection. The mind must unboggle from time to time. Some of the best learning and realization occurs during the unscheduled times, during recreation and excursions.

There is a tendency toward simplification rather than complication in the process of problem solving. The chief lesson of the Great Teachers Seminar has always been: "less is more." That is demonstrated in every way possible in conducting a GT Seminar.

## Use of the Term, Great Teachers

As is the case with all long-lived, widespread movements, the longer the life and the wider the spread, the more likely it is that there will be some distortion (beyond recognition sometimes) of the original. In recent years, there have been a few fine events using the phrase “great teachers” in their titles that have little to do with the widely recognized Great Teachers concept or model. While it is true that regional differences, variety of leadership styles, and natural evolution are healthy and always have contributed to the longevity and freshness of the GT Movement, care must be taken that they occur within certain rigid constants.

I have always promoted the idea of “rigid, minimal structure” (with emphasis on “minimal”). In other words, there must a dependable, identifiable set of practices and qualities present so that any person in the world can go to a Great Teachers event anywhere in the world and experience a similar format and philosophy. At the same time that person must have the assurance that the Great Teachers event in question will be unique because of the particular combination of people, values, and resources assembled there at that time. If there are too many diverse and unrelated kinds of things operating under the Great Teachers name, there will be a great deal of confusion, false expectation and disappointment. In short, Great Teachers Seminars must always be the same so that they can always be different. New facilitators sometimes get alarmed when “this year’s Great Teachers Seminar is not going like last year’s!” This is actually a very good sign as long as it is being run like a Great Teachers Seminar.

I urge all who use the term “Great Teacher(s)” in their titles and promotional materials to base all activities on the purposes, premises and distinctive features mentioned earlier in this document.

## Great Teachers Leadership and Training

There is no official training program for leadership in the Great Teachers Movement. There would be very little to do. Former participants with certain qualities (see below) are invited to return as facilitators; after a few years of that kind of experience, some are ready to go off and do their own seminar or retreat GT style. The experience is essential if one is to understand the simplicity of the process and recognize the infinite variety of outcomes. To facilitate a GT event is, in a way, simply to experience it from another point of view and to be responsible for helping to discern the key issues and values of the other participants, to recognize the human resources within the body of participants, and to make a program out of all that.

The facilitators do not participate in their small groups. Their chief duties are to listen (you can't listen when you are talking), to recognize and encourage the use of any relevant on-site talent and resources, and to gently enforce certain ground rules: no griping; equal time for all participants to present ideas and to respond to ideas; no pointless show-and-tell or comparing of institutional trivia; being oneself, saying what one really means (graciously), and the like.

Typically the qualities that make a successful Great Teachers facilitator are good listening skills, broad interests, good judgment, and a certain amount of charisma (whatever that is, but you recognize it when it comes into the room). It is also important that a facilitator not be a true believer in any particular school or method of doing group work.

As for the director of a Great Teachers event, after the initial explanations and preparatory groundwork, all of which must be done with great, conscious care and timing, there is little to do or say other than to put together a program with the help of the facilitators, to mind the process and the participants' response to the process as it develops, and to motivate the participants through word and deed. It is a lot like teaching. When a director is functioning optimally, it may occur to some participants to wonder for what purpose that person is actually there.

Ever since the original 1969 Illinois Great Teachers Seminar, the motto of the National Great Teachers Seminar has been “A Continuing Adventure in Staff Development.” Those who would be leaders in the movement must be willing to keep it as adventurous as good teaching itself is. They must be willing to operate without knowing for sure what is coming next, so that whatever develops is that which ought to have developed.

Finally, for a Great Teachers event to be successful there must be minimal ego involvement on the part of the director and facilitators alike.

## Future Development

In recent years, many people have assumed leadership roles and gained well-earned recognition in the Great Teachers Movement. Some have begun their own Great Teachers Seminars with or without direct help from me. This is as it should be and as I had always hoped, because I always have believed that as many teachers as possible should experience this process at least once in their careers. The Great Teachers model does not belong to me; it belongs to anyone who makes good use of it and who is driven by altruistic motives.

Just as the Great Teachers Movement promotes common sense, honesty, professional integrity, and simplicity, all Great Teachers Seminars must demonstrate same. The Great Teachers Model is itself a model of utter simplicity. I ask only that those who use it keep it simple for another 30 years.

David B. Gottshall  
P. O. Box 363  
Glen Ellyn, Illinois 60138  
1999