

# "The History and Nature of the National Great Teachers Movement"

Written in 1993 by David B. Gottshall, College of DuPage  
in Recognition of the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the NGTM

## **ABSTRACT**

In 1969, David B. Gottshall of College of DuPage 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.

The National Great Teacher Seminar, held annually at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, and the many other Great Teachers Seminars that it has engendered throughout North America, have been influencing staff development in higher education ever since. College of DuPage continues to be the seat of the National Great Teachers Seminar, and David Gottshall continues as director.

The seminar was created to provide an opportunity for teachers to improve their skills and to ponder and, if appropriate, to adjust their methods, behavior and attitude as teachers. It is based on the premises that teachers learn teaching best from one another and that creativity in teaching is enhanced by mixing teachers of diverse teaching fields, experience levels and interests. The focus is not on the teaching of specific disciplines, but rather on the art of teaching as such. The emphasis is on the universals of teaching and on the special nature of those who are and will be great teachers. It is based also on the notion that, if properly tapped, the collective wisdom, experience and creativity of any group of practicing educators far surpasses that of any individual expert.

The Great Teachers Movement (called a "movement" because it is not associated with, nor does it constitute a corporation or organization of any kind) has established

itself in many states, provinces and regions. All of the state-wide Great Teachers Seminars came into being as a result of participation and later training of certain teachers from those areas who attended the National Great Teachers Seminar in Wisconsin.

As the state-wide and province-wide Great Teachers Seminars develop, the Movement is carried by those participants to their own local colleges, and 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 which are both immensely effective and extremely cost-effective.

A quarter century of application of the practices and procedures of the Great Teachers Movement have proven them to be infinitely fruitful. This is due to the fact that they derive from a tradition of honesty, simplicity and common sense and are unrelated to any institutional or commercial interests.

The ultimate goal of the Great Teachers Movement is the constant improvement of higher education in North America through the celebration of good teaching.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Great Teachers Movement will be 25 years old in 1994. It is remarkable that a movement in education has thrived and continues to grow for a quarter century. However, due to its age and the ever growing distances from its Midwest point of origin, it is time to document its history and 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.

Although I am uncomfortable with the use of the first person, it would be clumsy for me to do otherwise in the writing of this document, since it is autobiographical in nature, and I am even more uncomfortable with "the author" and other falsely modest substantives.

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.

Perhaps the most confusing aspect of the history of the Great Teachers (GT) Movement is the use of the term "Great Teachers" itself. The term was first used productively by the late Roger H. Garrison (1918-1984) of Westbrook College in Portland, Maine. Roger was a key figure in the origins of professional staff development as we know it today, as well as in the development of the community college movement as a whole.

### **THE ROGER H. GARRISON CONNECTION**

In 1969, after several years of experimentation in New York State and elsewhere, Roger Garrison founded a seminar which he called the "National Seminar for Great Teachers" on his home campus in Maine. I had the good fortune of being involved in that excitingly different departure from traditional teacher training (see reproduction of AAJC Journal cover, Appendix "A"). I was so excited about the potential of his ideas that, with the support of my home college (College of DuPage in Illinois) and with the encouragement of Roger Garrison, I founded the Illinois Great Teachers Seminar the very next year (see also the names of my first planning committee, Appendix "B"). Roger and I became close friends and collaborators in many staff development projects, and I served annually on the staff of his National Seminar for Master Teachers (see below) until his death and many years beyond.

After Roger's first successful seminar in 1969, the American Association of Junior Colleges (later renamed "American Association of Community and Junior Colleges" now the "American Association of Community Colleges") who had funded it, determined that it did not need further funding. Garrison continued to offer it on a cost-recovery basis.

Although Roger never discussed his choice or 'later' rejection of the term "Great Teachers", he decided to rename his annual event the "National Seminar for Master Teachers" from the third year onward. He suggested that I keep the name "Great Teachers", since I preferred it, and because that would help to distinguish between two separate events that were somewhat alike in spirit and philosophy but which had become clearly different in style and method. Within a few years (see historical chart

below), the Illinois Great Teachers Seminar became a national event, and I renamed it the National Great Teachers Seminar.

From that point on to the present, there have been two important annual events each summer: Roger Garrison's National Seminar for Master Teachers in Portland, Maine (Greenfield, Mass. after his death) and my National Great Teachers Seminar in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin (formerly the Illinois Great Teachers Seminar), the latter being the origin of the Great Teachers Movement as we know it today. All existing Great Teachers Seminars and variations thereof developed and continue to develop directly or indirectly from that seminar in Wisconsin.

### **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 straight-forward 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 shoptalk 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.

There is nothing in writing other than this document which you are reading now. Everything is passed on by oral tradition in order to prevent the development of any form of true-believership or fixed procedure which might come to be followed to the letter and of which the educational profession 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 quarter-century. 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 into the next century.

All of the state-wide and province-wide Great Teachers Seminars came into being as a result of participation and later training of certain teachers from those areas who had attended the National Great Teachers Seminars in Wisconsin or Alberta, Canada. As these larger off-spring seminars develop, the Movement is carried by those participants to their own local colleges and, 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 which are both immensely effective and extremely cost-effective (see "Other Uses of the Great Teachers Model", Appendix "C".)

### **THE NCSPOD CONNECTION**

(National Council for Staff, Program and Organizational Development, an affiliate council of the American Association of Community Colleges)

In 1978, as a member of the NCSPOD Staff Development Commission, I wrote a memo to my fellow commissioners suggesting that the Council actively promote the developing Great Teachers Seminars (see Appendix "D"). The suggestion was well taken. The Great Teachers Movement owes a great deal to NCSPOD for its ongoing endorsement. Over the years the Great Teachers topic has been present in virtually all conference programming, and some of the local and regional great teacher seminars which developed since 1979 were conceived and nourished within the organization and its membership.

### **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 these purposes 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 scape-goating 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.

### **WHEN IS A "GREAT TEACHERS" EVENT NOT A GREAT TEACHERS EVENT?**

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 which have little to do with the widely recognized Great Teachers concept or model. It would be better if they were offered under some other name and if they used original, more accurate promotional materials. 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 be 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.

There are so few good, solid staff development options; let us celebrate and promote the variety that is available by calling things that are different by different names.

## **GREAT TEACHERS LEADERSHIP & 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 have always 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 25 years.

**SOURCE:** Original Document written by David Gottshall and Published by the College of DuPage in 1993.