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When the NEH Taught Rhetoric and Composition What they Had in Common

The photograph arrived by mail. 8 by 10. Black and white. Louie Crew hadn't been able to find it when I interviewed him at his apartment in New Jersey.

Summer of '77. A seminar room at the University of Texas – Austin.

Twelve college teachers, six seated and six standing behind. Actually, twelve college teachers and James Sledd, the linguist scholar-leader of this six-week National Endowment for the Humanities seminar. Twelve college teachers in this photo, all with their fists in the air, each with a version of the pose that had captured so much media attention nine summers earlier at the '68 Olympics.

There, in the center of the front row, is Louie Crew. He's 74 now, but in this picture he's 41. His fist is high. I email him and ask if he can remember why the group posed this way. He writes back.

"Note the gentle smiles with the raised fists. We spontaneously enjoyed our collaboration. Sledd titled the NEH seminar 'Standard English: Social Control and Individual Freedom.' ... we were in solidarity for individual freedom and against social control."

How did this happen? How did twelve college teachers come to each receive \$2500 to spend six weeks in Austin raising their fists right in the midst of a well-publicized national literacy crisis?

Well, to answer that, we must look back five years.

It's 1972, and the National Endowment for the Humanities, founded alongside the National Endowment for the Arts is not yet ten years old. The NEH's budget has grown from a 1965 "Congressional outlay of \$2.5 million" to a 1971 total of "\$11.6 million . . . and \$2.5 million in matching funds" (Katzowitz).

But Ronald Berman, confirmed as the new chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities in December 1971, is hungry to grow that budget. He's also under pressure to develop the NEH's public profile, for the NEH is too often compared unfavorably to the National Endowment for the Arts, already celebrated for large audiences and "comprehensible" performances (Berman 10). No one understands what the "humanities" are. Berman knows he must work quickly. Budget appropriations are already underway for 1973. So, as he describes in his memoir, *Culture and Politics*, as soon as he's confirmed, he begins the rounds in Washington, meeting first with White House senior staff members who can get him access to President Nixon even though he is unknown in the capital circuit (Berman 14). Then, he moves on to those on the House Subcommittee on Appropriations who "were almost without exception from states having economic interests in forests, rivers and dams" (Berman 21). These are politicians, according to Berman, who don't have patience for the academic jargon of university humanities scholars. They were by his description "colorful, clever, opinionated and willing to listen," "shrewd and inquisitive" (Berman 21). Berman says he "respected and liked them enormously," but they "were not entertained by ideas and they did not vote funds without some pragmatic purpose. They wanted large numbers of voters to benefit visibly" (21). They had what he calls "frontier frames of mind" (Berman 21).

At the same time, word within academia, is that the humanities are in crisis. Fewer and fewer students are studying philosophy, literature, history, classical and modern languages. Institutions, short on funds, cut programs with dropping enrollments and support for the humanities shrinks. But some report this so called "crisis" in the humanities is a crisis only because professional humanities scholars are guilty of just what Berman finds congresspeople leery of – slippery elitism. As Mel Topf describes it in a *College English* article published in this period: "Nothing more directly reflects the crisis in the humanities than that the very attempt to define them is lost in abstractions all of which sound equally plausible and equally grand." Ronald Berman thinks to himself that the humanities might just gain support if only the public – and their representatives – could understand what they're supporting.

In his memoir Berman describes a member of his staff coming up with a new idea, an idea he thinks could make the humanities relevant – and could spread the principles of humanities education across the country. Summer Seminars for Teachers.

The NEH had already, for many years, offered research fellowships to humanities scholars. But Berman says from the outset this new program "was destined to become one of the Endowment's major programs because of its simplicity and usefulness" (25) The program "intended to move teachers from small campuses without facilities for research to great universities which would undertake to retrain them," in small classes "under the direction of experts in their field." (25) A "cheap and large-scale enterprise which could quickly transfer the benefits of universities to places which needed development, but had no chance of affording it" (25). Already out on the frontier, in other words, faculty would be returned to the type of civilization many of them had experienced in graduate school, and over six summer weeks they would regain the sustenance

needed for the rugged demands of scholarship without resources, high enrollment teaching, and the intellectual isolation that would face them when they went back to their everyday professional lives the following September.

The Summer Seminars for Teachers program began in 1973, with Walker Gibson's single rhetoric and composition seminar "Writing in the First Years of College" listed on the NEH's promotional flyer alongside the seminars of known literary scholars. Note Harold Bloom's "Poetic Influence and Romantic Tradition, British and American 1789 to the Present" and Helen Vendler's "Problems in the Interpretation of Poetry." Gibson had intended the seminar to be called "Reading and Writing in the First Years of College," but he notes the name was shortened to just writing "at the suggestion of the Endowment."

We don't have to wonder how Gibson ended up with one of these first seminars in the summer of '73 because he carefully catalogued his own papers for the UMass archives. In an official but personal letter dated November 9th 1972, Chairman Berman tells Gibson that in the NEH's "search for scholars to conduct these brand new seminars," he has been "recommended . . . by the Modern Language Association as a person qualified for the task by reason of . . . scholarship and . . . ability and interest in undergraduate teaching." Also, considering the NEH's goals for these seminars, it's no surprise to find Gibson invited, since his institution was finalizing its slow transformation from Mass Agricultural, founded in 1863, to Massachusetts State College until 1947, to what it had become, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, a research intensive with a twenty-eight story library opened in 1973 as the "tallest library in the world" (<http://www.umass.edu/umhome/about/history.html>).

You have, in your copied packet, three McBee cards from the NEH's Office of Budget and Planning's archives. These were the pre-computer cards that catalogued the NEH grant-giving. Notice congressional district among the information given for each grant. I wish there were more time today to spend on Gibson's three seminars, each with the same title. But his seminar, like the others in those early years of the program, did bring faculty from small teaching intensive institutions to this tallest library in the world. And if your view of the country was from Washington DC or Cambridge, Massachusetts or New Haven, Connecticut you might have thought faculty were arriving from the frontier when they came from places like Meramec Community College, Diablo Valley College, West Chester State College, Scottsdale Community College, Centenary College, and Michigan Tech, home institutions of some of the faculty in Gibson's summer '74 seminar. And, by the way, that final participant from Michigan Tech is none other than a young Art Young, well known writing across the curriculum scholar, just to give you a sense of who came in for the summer from the frontier.

Young was lucky to get in, junior as he was in the field, for Gibson says he “favored department heads and directors of writing programs, hoping to have some impact on other teachers at the home colleges.” And though Gibson was overwhelmed to find he had to choose twelve participants from 101 applicants the first year, by the time he had to choose twelve from 216 applications in the third year, he knew who he was looking to have in residence for six weeks.

A participant from ’73 is quoted in Gibson’s final report to the NEH, saying: “The big plus was the overall tone of the seminar – low-keyed presentations, pleasant surroundings, togetherness and camaraderie . . . an eagerness to share ideas and an absence of competitiveness.” Gibson writes “I think I hesitated to tell a 50-year old college professor with a PhD that his/her writing is terrible, but I should have been willing to take that risk.” Both comments may explain why these early seminars so completely fulfilled the NEH’s goal of encouraging “the original meaning of ‘fellowship’ – its collegiality and common purpose especially” (Berman 89). There were final seminar projects but never any grades, something all the seminar leaders, all graduate faculty, note as a plus.

I can’t tell you what collegiality looked like in Amherst. For here is what Gibson writes to the participants in September of ’73.

Alas, there was no film in the camera, or something. Our Official Photo simply never developed. All our posings and postures in front of the Faculty Club that sunny noontime will go unrecorded. No composition there! And when will thirteen ever meet again? I feel very bad about this snafu: many apologies. For what it’s worth in compensation, I’m sending each of you a print of one our Market Hill picnics. You’ll recognize some friends, if not yourself.

But Gibson does try to do what he can to have the 13 of each summer meet again. He writes to each group in the years after the seminars saying “Thought you might like to see your successors” in this summer’s seminar or here’s “news I’ve had of you over the winter” or “Alan proposes an anthology, as I understand it, in which each of you ex-summer seminarians address yourselves to an Approach you know and love. Now there’s an idea. Get going.” They may have packed up their wagons and set off back to the frontier but Gibson reminds them they’ve been and can remain a scholarly community.

In the closing of his final report on his third summer seminar Gibson writes:

“I am asked to include a brief statement “on the importance of the project as a contribution to the national interest in strengthening all aspects of the humanities.” The teaching of writing in the first year or two of college is of course a central enterprise in American education, in spite of some recent attrition. It requires, however, new justification and new energy.”

“It would be a contribution to the national interest if English teachers could be persuaded to see language in the largest possible social and political context. To do this without losing sight of our proven skills – the examination of rhetoric and style in detail – is the central challenge our profession faces.”

Gibson was well aware of the variety of approaches rhetoricians, compositionists, and linguists were bringing to issues of “language standards” and the importance of those perspectives for expanding knowledge. From his reflection on his first ’73 seminar, in which he tells the NEH: “I should try to find some room for a survey of other points of view in our huge subject area. Possibilities in pedagogy (Christensen, Macrorie), in rhetoric (Burke), in linguistics (Chomsky)” to the early summer of 1975 letter he writes to his soon-to-arrive summer group. I enclose “some bedtime reading” he tells them, including the special fall 1974 issue of CCC, containing “The Students’ Right to Their Own Language.” He did not always find success. For example, he reports to the NEH that when the Students Right document was discussed in the ’75 seminar, there was “general opposition ...generally expressed by the participants.”

James Sledd, who wrote vehemently and fist raised, for students’ right and against the very bidialectalism Gibson featured in his earlier Amherst seminars, had also long professed his opinion about government involvement in the work of English teachers. In 1969 he had written:

Government and the foundations began to spray money over the academic landscape like liquid fertilizer, and the professional societies began to bray and paw at the rich new grass. In that proud hour, any teacher who could dream up an expensive scheme for keeping things as they were while pretending to make a change was sure of becoming the director of a project or a center and of flying first-class to Washington twice a month. The white businessman strengthened his control of the educational system while giving the impression of vast humanitarian activity. (34)

He’s not really exaggerating. “I’m just back from Washington,” Walker Gibson tells his seminar alums in one letter. I’ve been meeting and eating with the other seminar leaders and they are an impressive and gung ho bunch.

I can’t yet tell you how it was that Sledd came to set his sharp sarcasm about governmental funding aside and accept \$196,000 in NEH grants because I don’t yet have his proposals from the NEH archives. But I can tell you Sledd hosted at least two NEH seminars with the title of Louie Crew’s 1977 seminar – where the opening picture was taken -- and at least two others. That’s almost 50 faculty from the frontier who went to the city of Austin to raise their fists. Perhaps Sledd did his own cost-benefit analysis of the change he could create by accepting the very government funding he had critiqued.

By funding directly into the literacy crisis and education, and directly into the desires of congresspeople who wanted to know the humanities were doing something for their constituencies, the NEH reached an all time budget high of \$400 million dollars in 1978. Interestingly, the NEH did also made it possible that English teachers might “see language in the largest possible social and political context . . . without losing sight of our proven skills – the examination of rhetoric and style in detail,” just as Gibson had hoped. For by the summer of 1978 (as you’ll see in your handout) twelve summer seminars in the teaching of writing, representing a variety of approaches, were advertised in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, including seminars hosted by those Gibson recommended when asked for suggestions of who might follow him as a summer seminar leader -- Douglas, Gorrell, Winterowd – along with names you’ll know like Coles, Williams, Bitzer, Sledd.

As others have pointed out (Faigley), the 70s literacy crisis was good to rhetoric and composition, linked or separate, and the NEH was key to their health and growth, encouraging rhetoric and composition that for all their well-publicized divides what they could have in common and what they could get funding for was writing in the first college years. The NEH’s imprimatur also brought rhetoric and composition, and its many teacher-scholars -- more than 140 in the summer of ’78 alone -- in from the frontier, to the center of the humanities, to seminar rooms and tall libraries, and most of all, to the company of their peers. Characterized as workaday have-nots who were invited, if only temporarily, into a well-defined academic class system in the humanities, these teacher-scholars found powerful, sustaining community and ideas that stayed with them through their teaching careers. That’s the kind of community that makes you smile and laugh and want to raise your fists to the power of all you’ve studied for six weeks. The kind of community that leads you to take a picture home, frame it, keep it on your desk among stacks of student papers, and save it for 33 years.

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