NEH Designs Summer Seminars for College Teachers

It was 1969 when a young professor, Will Griffin, arrived on Maui, the third island in the chain of Hawaiian Islands, to become the only philosophy teacher at Maui Community College. The young philosopher, fresh out of graduate school and committed to teaching at a community college, looked forward to his job. The two-year school was financially stable. His students were bright and an interesting mix of Eastern cultures. The tropical surroundings were lovely, lush and green. He was happy with his position there.

But by 1976, seven years had passed and Griffin had "the itch."

"Call it tropical brain rot or whatever," he said recently, "but I had been seven years without direct contact with colleagues in my field. I was isolated, the only philosophy teacher on a little island in the middle of the Pacific."

Trained in the rather esoteric field of philosophical phenomenology, Griffin craved access to a major research library and the intense philosophical discussions he had known in his graduate school days. "I read the professional journals, but all by myself," he said. "I wondered if I had a grasp of the material. I needed to get out of here to find out whether I really was in touch at all."

Although Griffin felt out of touch on Maui, he was not surprised to learn that his complaint was common to many professors. Griffin's story was only more dramatic because his school was set in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. But thousands of teachers at small undergraduate schools across the country report similar suspicions of creeping intellectual stagnation. While generally happy with their teaching posts, they too get "the itch."

After all, teachers, especially teachers at small schools, require the stimulus of new ideas. They need something to combat the intellectual wear and tear imposed by the isolation, heavy teaching loads, and limited research facilities of smaller schools.

In 1972, Dr. James H. Blessing, Director of the Division of Fellowships of the National Endowment for the Humanities, conceived the solution to the problem: Summer Seminars for College Teachers. The program provided teachers at undergraduate and two-year colleges the chance to work in their areas of scholarship with distinguished scholars at institutions with libraries suitable for advanced study. The seminar award to each individual includes a $2,000 stipend and travel allowance up to $400.

The seminars, each with twelve participants, are offered in all disciplines of the humanities and humanistic social sciences. Applicants for the seminars must have been teaching at least three years in a college department that does not have a doctoral program.

Will Griffin of Maui Community College was a 1976 participant in the Summer Seminars for College Teachers program. He says the experience was unforgettable. For eight weeks he and eleven other philosophy teachers worked in Berkeley, California, under internationally-known philosopher Dr. Marjorie Grene of the University of California at Davis. Studying the topic "The Human Condition: Themes in Recent European Philosophy," the group tackled textual analysis of Heidegger's Being and Time and Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception.
The Prevalence of Poetry in Oral Tradition

If you were asked to write an epic poem in trochaic pentameter lines, you might consider this a possible task. But, if you were handed a musical instrument and asked to sing a lengthy epic composed as you performed it to fit both musical and poetic rhythms, it would be altogether a different matter.

In our own culture, creating poetry is a solitary act perfected through trial combinations of words and sounds. If we write something we don’t like, we can always scratch it out and begin anew. The act of composing a finished product before a critical audience is beyond our realm of experience.

Before the existence of written language, poets from many countries created their narratives and songs during fast-paced performance. Their poems were not worked out and memorized in advance. Instead, they were shaped during performance according to audience response. What is it about oral tradition that makes this feat possible?

In 1933, oral tradition was very much alive in parts of rural Yugoslavia where Milman Parry and Albert Lord recorded Serbo-Croatian epic singers, guslari, as a living analog to their theory of the oral origin of the Iliad and the Odyssey. Their work is preserved in the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature at Harvard University and, in 1974, Albert Lord and David Bynum received an NEH Education Grant to develop a complete program of interdepartmental instruction on the technology, forms, and interpretation of major oral traditions.

During their field research, Parry and Lord found that the rapid oral creation of metrical lines is done by using familiar expressions and patterned speech evolved over centuries of performance by guslari who could neither read nor write. The tales are built around recurrent themes absorbed by the singers in much the same way infants acquire language. Themes and formulas are useful, but not fixed. Each recreation by a singer is, in fact, an original creation.

Studies of heroic epics have been the focus of considerable research, but some scholars believe that this work has overlooked the prevalence of poetry in many aspects of oral tradition. With the help of an NEH Research Grant, four specialists formed an interdisciplinary team to investigate the theory that the oral process in guslari tales is not a singular phenomenon, but rather a mode of thinking and communicating that pervades the entire culture.

Cultural anthropologist Joel Halmpern and sociolinguist Barbara Halpern joined with Robert Creed, a specialist in traditional oral poetry, and John Foley, a specialist in comparative oral tradition. The Halperns had worked intermittently in the Serbian village of Orasac since 1953 when they selected it for its distance away from large population centers and its historical importance as the site of the first revolt against the Turks in 1804. The team decided to return there for further study and recording of village speech.

In previous work, the Halperns had found that most older people in Orasac still use oral transmission for information they consider worthy of preservation. They sometimes respond to questions by composing their answers in verse and even casual conversation reveals the existence of some internal rhythm.

Joining the villagers in physical labor and taping whenever informal exchanges could occur naturally, everyone, including the Halpern and Foley children, shared in flailing plums for the famous Serbian brandy,
herding pigs, and kneading the wheaten loaves that were baked in outdoor ovens. To avoid producing synthetic performances, the team had their tape recorders ready and waiting during these everyday as well as ritual circumstances.

Their patience was rewarded with a rich collection of new data. On tape, old men recollect their genealogies back to their clan founder. In metrical speech, they detail eight to ten generations of family history. Old women use patterned speech in reciting recipes for gibanica and other traditional Serbian foods.

The team recorded everything from extended epic narratives to folk remedies for skin inflammations. Their tapes include oral instructions for making a yoke and other folk craft "how-to" spoken in pattern. Mourning in the form of stylized, chanted laments at the graveyard, ritual wedding lyrics, and traditional verbal market etiquette were taped along with poetic and patterned everyday speech.

Barbara Halpern's long association with village women made possible the recording of closely guarded basme, oral charms used by conjurers for folk curing. Villagers now have easy access to doctors and pharmacists but, as one old man says, "For some things what do doctors know? For some things you have to cure with charms."

Just as epic singing is done exclusively by men in Serbia, only older women can practice the oral art of banjanje. The ritual charms for curing are learned by young girls as part of their bridal dowry, but they are not allowed to practice them until they have passed the age of childbearing and become ritually clean. Like the men's epic tales, charms are learned not by memorization, but through an unconscious absorbing of the rhythmic patterns.

When a conjurer implores a red man on a red horse to carry away the red wind disease to that other world "where the cat doesn't meow, where the pig doesn't grunt," she explains that she is unaccustomed to thinking about the words she is saying. "It's like whispering," she says. "I recall the words, and what I don't recall I dream at night."

Throughout their research, the team made every possible effort to preserve the social context which made the various speech acts meaningful. The joint research data from each of the team specialists as well as the Orasac tapes are being shared with students in interdisciplinary seminars at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. Taught by Robert Creed and Barbara Halpern, these seminars focus on the similarity of oral process in different cultures by using comparative data from Old English, Homeric Greek, and other oral traditions.

The Amherst seminars have included lectures by Joel Halpern on how oral tradition helps to maintain kinship ties, heritage, identity, and social structure. John Foley adds his special skills when he can get away from Cambridge, where he is on leave from Emory University to work with the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature at Harvard University.

The tapes of Orasac villagers speaking in the poetic patterns that permeate their lives have led to a new understanding of how individuals in an oral culture achieve a sense of identity through their ability to make the collective wisdom of the past into the living inheritance of the present.

An interest in how oral traditions are reshaped when villagers move to literate societies is leading team members to new research among Balkan immigrants in North America. Typical of what they have already recorded is a Serbian-Canadian who composes heroic epics in the grand narrative style—but the opposing armies with their banners and ritual movements are now adversaries in a Toronto soccer match!

—Pamela Brooke

Cika Dragise recollecting heroic epics to the accompaniment of the gusle in an ancient tradition.