

SEMINAR BORN IN A RAIL CAR:
THE HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF ISTE

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In this short invitation paper, the co-originaors of ISTE recall the events and ideas that led to the first seminar in 1981 and influenced ISTE's subsequent development.

Back in '79 (as opposed to '97), the opportunities to meet with colleague teacher educators on an international basis were somewhat limited. The Association for Teacher Education in Europe (ATEE) was establishing itself as an annual event with internal squabbles about whether the conference language should be French, German or English. There were one or two other European initiatives underway funded by the European Commission. The International Council on Education for Teaching (ICET), an American based world assembly, was active, but usually targeted at government ministry levels. Our School of Education and Humanities of North East London Polytechnic (then NELP, now the University of East London or UEL) was receiving a regular stream of overseas visitors, especially from the Americas and Antipodes. These were exciting days for us. Our school was enjoying something of a reputation for innovation in teacher education program design and perhaps it was this that led to invitations to present our work at a few national and international gatherings.

It was in the spring of '80, on a rail journey home after one such international event in Manchester, that the pair of us began to reflect on our experiences. A brief analysis revealed that the parts we had both found most interesting had not been the official conference program but, rather, the informal interactions around it. Refreshment and meal breaks, unscheduled time and most of all evenings either in the bar or in the communal kitchens of the dormitory accommodation were where we had important contact and communication with new international colleagues. It was during these moments that we really explored important professional issues of common concern, got beyond formalities, began to understand and like each other, and above all, feel professionally enriched.

The official program of most international events at that time usually involved a series of keynote presentations. The participants' job was mainly to provide an audience for this. Speakers were either recognized experts in their educational fields, or aspiring to be so. Most were very certain about the significance of their research findings, philosophical analyses, ideological positions, and so on. The result, more often than not, mirrored either an academic presentation in the classical European tradition, a dry description of a research procedure, a step-by-step de-bunking of accepted practices, or a rallying cry for revolution from hegemonic or reactionary forces. Almost everyone over-ran their time allowance, usually at the expense of questions from the floor. Worst of all, many speakers simply read from a transcript which we either already had in our hand, or was distributed at the end. The communication traffic was pretty much one-way, and the chairs got harder to sit on as the proceedings progressed.

Perhaps it was the relative comfort of the seats on that British Rail carriage that put us in reflective mood. NELP had gained fame by turning critical thinking

about teacher education into a series of preservice and inservice programs that had raised the status of "practice" to at least that of "research" and "theory". The starting point had been a thorough consideration of the question: "What is a competent teacher?", eventually followed by "Where do you learn to become a competent teacher?" and the painful realization that it certainly was not on the college campus. Our students therefore spent an average of 3 days per week in schools, one day on campus and one day in private study throughout their training. School of Education faculty went to their students' schools to conduct on-site seminars with them and the teachers who acted as school supervisors. These were heady days for us. We had developed programs that ranged from diplomas to masters, and they were producing positive and exciting results.

Turning our newly acquired experience in teacher education program design to focus on international teacher education events was a logical step. The question: "What is it that is likely to motivate an international gathering of teacher educators?" was easily answered. Here are some of the points we itemized:

- present the event as a "seminar", not a "conference" implying a collective approach to thinking about teacher education;
- make it at least a 6-day residential experience, located somewhere free from other worldly distractions, providing time in a peaceful setting so that people do not have to depart just at the point where they feel they are making important connections with other participants;
- keep the participant numbers relatively small, about 80 persons, so that everyone gets to know everyone else, and have everyone stay for the whole time, not swing by for just enough time to give a presentation and leave;
- make sure that participants' are comfortable regarding meals, accommodation and refreshment so that they can concentrate on the business of the event;
- make the focal point small paper groups of about 12 persons that stay together for most of the time, not keynote presentations;
- have everyone bring a paper with 20 copies for others in their paper group to read ahead of discussion time and allow only 15 minutes or less for the author to introduce it;
- emphasize that polished, finished, papers are not so important, but that work in progress is legitimate, and that the proceedings allow teacher educators to test out their ideas on peers prior to paper completion;
- recognize that many of us are uncertain about our work in a way which can benefit from the reactions and advice from colleagues;
- view the collected participants as a unique professional resource comprising an array of experience, concern, culture, language, offering professional enrichment for all to share;
- focus on key issues and questions for the future, not the past, or at least tease out the implications of the past and current practice for the future.

It was probably the final point that accounts for the first title of what we now call ISTE, which was: Teacher Education in the 80s and 90s. It is a title that sounds like a single event, not an annual series, and that is how we saw it at the time. If you had told either of us then that now, anticipating the millennium, this uncertain

beginning would be still going on almost 20 years later, we would have laughed in disbelief.

That first seminar of 80 people from 15 different countries, based on a series of untested ideas, simply "worked". As organizers, the two of us did not get much sleep. Long days and evenings usually ended for us in a midnight meeting to review the activities and look for adjustments for the next day's proceedings. We had selected a team of colleagues experienced in facilitating small discussion groups to be paper group leaders and they were also included in this daily review process. We worried about anyone who appeared to be less involved than others. We found ways to make sure everyone was included at the core of the experiences, and ways to gently soften others away from taking a competitive, rather than collaborative approach. Most of all, we had to constantly remind ourselves and other English speakers, of our own mother-tongue advantage. In this way we became a family of professionals.

The rest is now history. Here ISTE is, all these years later, still alive and vibrant, still searching for ways to improve teacher education and mutually stimulate the professionalism of teacher educators. We have broken through some significant barriers: the "iron curtain" prior to revolution, the Arab and Israeli divide, the two Chinas, the pressures of South African apartheid, the relative gulf between developing and more developed nations. The annual seminar has developed a mother organization: the International SOCIETY for Teacher Education with a constitution that ensures and protects the essential format of the seminar ~ those key elements worked out on that 1980 rail car ride, a steering committee, a Secretary General, a thrice yearly newsletter, an internet list server and discussion forum. The publication you are now reading represents another important progression, the Journal of the International Society for Teacher Education or JISTE, the society's own refereed professional journal, taking its essential philosophy to an ever widening audience. Add to this the countless instances of joint research, co-authorship, faculty and student exchange programs, visiting professorships, associated events, and a world family of teacher educators now covering almost every part of the globe.

At the first TE80/90 the idea of repeating it on an annual basis was raised by some of the participants. We had not considered this at all in our planning. Someone said "Most annual events die after 3 years!". TE80/90 has stood a far greater test of time. Had we not changed this original title to ISTE we would now have to be thinking of a new one, like TE2000. Perhaps ISTE has survived and prospered in part because of its philosophical underpinnings and organizational structures which have not significantly changed from those worked out at 100 kilometers per hour, somewhere between Manchester and London. Thanks to countless professional colleagues, the train is still rattling along picking up new passengers at each stop on a track which is firmly laid out into the 21st century.

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