DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 897 RC 018 672

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TITLE	Redefining "Higher Education" through the Appalachian Teachers' Network.
PUB DATE	6 Nov 91
NOTE	9p.; Paper presented at the Appalachian Studies Conference (Berea, KY, March 22-24, 1991).
PUB TYPE	Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Cultural Education; Curriculum Development; Educational Innovation; Elementary Secondary Education; *Higher Education; *Inservice Teacher Education; Networks; Program Development; Rural Education
IDENTIFIERS	*Appalachian Studies; *Appalachian Teachers Network; Virginia

ABSTRACT

The term "higher education" should be redefined to give all grade levels and subjects equal educational value. This effort should involve the Appalachian Teachers' Network, which consists of a group of teachers from all grade levels working to make Appalachian Studies an integral part of education. At Radford University (Virginia) the Appalachian Studies Program has benefitted both students and professors in helping them realize the value of their heritage. Because public schools need this type of program, the Appalachian Teachers' Network was formed. The network began with a 10-teacher advisory committee to guide the use of Appalachian Studies in member's schools. A conference successfully brought together 62 teachers from southwestern Virginia to share information about the region and to discuss how to use this knowledge in teaching. Sessions were led by public school teachers and humanities scholars from area colleges and universities. Topics included local history, community as teacher, organizing a festival, and Appalachian literature and dialect studies. The second project, a newsletter planned for publication in January 1992, would help teachers to share information. The next conference will: (1) devote an equal amount of time to a scholar's discussion of a topic and to a practitioner's explanation of the topic; and (2) divide participants into grade-level groups for end-of-the-day sharing sessions. (LP)

Conference on Higher Education in Appalachia

Redefining "Higher Education" through the Appalachian Teachers' Network

Jim Minick

November 6, 1991

Ever since I taught in a high school, I've been bothered by the term, "Higher Education." Higher than what?, I complained, knowing that the hierarchy of the educational system kept me poorly paid and doing more disciplining than teaching. I wanted to rebel, to redefine the system, or at least this word. I thought the term should be defined so that it included all levels, kindergarten to college, and all subjects, favoring none.

Well, my definition isn't in Webster's yet, and now I'm an Instructor at one of these institutions of "higher education." I'm still questioning this term and its restrictiveness, but I'm trying to do so in constructive manners. One of these constructive avenues and the focus of this paper, is the newly formed Appalachian Teachers' Network, a network of teachers from all levels working to make Appalachian Studies an integral part of each child's education. First a look at the rationale and history of this project and then an analysis of its successes and problems.

RATIONALE

This type of program, that brings Appalachian Studies into the

public schools as a viable part of the humanities, has been called for by Jim Wayne Miller, Appalachian scholar, poet and writer. He recognizes the value of regional knowledge and sees that:

> regional emphases...constitute way[s]...of making the humanities speak more immediately and directly to students, and of presenting the humanities not as adornments appropriate to someone else's life but as a means of inspecting our own lives, here and now.

He also writes that "regional studies can make useful contributions to programs of teacher training and retraining" by helping teachers recognize and consider the differences in localities. Most importantly, though, Miller believes "that the more people know about their country, its past and present, the rich diversity of its people and places, the more they care about it" and themselves (Geography and Literature: A Meeting of the Disciplines. p. 16).

On the collegiate level, Appalachian Studies has been very successful. At Radford University, I've seen both professors and students find their own voices through the Appalachian Studies Program. These individuals from the region who always tried to be somebody else, finally hear songs and stories they know, finally see that their heritage is valuable and offers them a source of identity. They begin to seek their roots, find their history, and in the process, better understand who they are. This type of program needs to exist in our public schools, and the Appalachian Teachers' Network is beginning to meet this need.

HISTORY

Throughout its eleven year history, Radford University's Appalachian Studies Program has regularly received calls from teachers seeking information on how to incorporate Appalachian Studies into their classrooms. These teachers want to know how to make the regional history, literature, folklore, and culture a vital part of each student's learning. However, they have little support or background knowledge in regional studies. Dr. Grace Toney Edwards and other faculty in the Appalachian Studies Program have the knowledge and have been trying to share it through workshops, presentations, and Graduate courses. But this effort, though great, still fits into the hierarchical mode of "top-down" thinking and also, due to other commitments, has only been sporadic. Thus there hasn't been a constructive, consistent, and organized manner to share this knowledge, or for teachers to discover their own knowledge.

As part of one of my Graduate courses with Dr. Edwards, I began researching and organizing a network of teachers of like mind. What I found was a core of teachers from all levels who had already in some way experimented and used Appalachian Studies in their schools, thanks in part, to their previous work with the Radford University program. These teachers had experience using the regional literature, developing local history projects, and organizing heritage weeks and storytelling groups. These ten

teachers also were willing to form an Advisory Committee for this Network.

This Committee met in the early fall of 1990 and decided to start with two projects. The first, a conference, would bring together teachers from Southwest Virginia and teach them specific information about this region and how to use this knowledge with their students. The second project, a newsletter to be published in January of 1992, would follow the conference and act as a networking tool for teachers to share their findings. The rest of that fall and winter I spent organizing the conference, putting together a resource packet, and writing grant proposals. The conference program and packet came together fairly quickly and easily; the money didn't. But by early summer, a combination of four different grants from The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, The Virginia Commission for the Arts, and Virginia COOL, enabled us to create a quality conference and newsletter.

The conference took place on September 14, 1991 and succeeded in both teaching teachers Appalachian Studies and in bringing together educators from all levels. In the morning, concurrent sessions covered a wide range of topics including: local history, community as teacher, organizing a festival, and Appalachian literature and dialect study. These sessions, six total, were led by five public school teachers from all levels and four humanities scholars from area colleges and universities. I especially was glad to see and

be a part of the process of breaking down the educational hierarchy; teachers learned from professors and professors learned just as much from teachers.

After lunch, storyteller and actress, Anndrena Belcher, taught us storytelling techniques for teachers, which for many participants, was the highlight of the day. Belcher led us in specific games and activities to encourage creativity and storytelling. She also emphasized the fact that each child has a story to tell and we as teachers must help him or her value and tell this story.

The day ended with sharing sessions facilitated by teachers on the Advisory Committee. During these sessions, teachers gathered to share what they had learned and plan how they could make this learning accessible to their students.

Sixty-two people participated and, as stated in their evaluations, all of them praised the diversity of the audience and the workshops offered. As one presenter noted in her evaluation: "The major strengths (of this conference) were the mix of college-level humanities scholars and public school teachers both as presenters and audience members, the diversity of topics for the sessions, and the overall sharing among attenders." Other participants commented on the "great idea-sharing," the "enthusiasm created," and the "specific information gathered to use in my room." One participant even commented on the dedication of the teachers who "came from a

wide-ranging geographical area; one, for example, starting at 4:00 A.M. to drive from Norton, VA." We wanted to attract committed people and begin this Network with a quality and energizing program and the conference did both of these.

HURDLES TO OVERCOME FOR THE NETWORK AND NEXT CONFERENCE

The first major problem with the conference was not having the coffee ready early enough in the morning. But aside from this "major" dilemma, two deeper conflicts emerged from the day. I've come to learn that the majority of teachers are very pragmatic; if they value some area of knowledge, like dialect-study, for example, they want to know how to make it a part of their classroom through specific projects and exercises. This how-to thinking conflicts with the view of the major funder, The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, and with the thinking of some of the university-level scholars. These folks value the area of knowledge (i.e. linguistics) for itself and want to see more intellectual energy devoted to understanding this knowledge and its history than in making it accessible to fifth graders. This conflict is real; I hear the arguments from both sides. As an individual, I value both types of thinking, so as an organizer, I try to find solutions. Thus far, my solution is to balance and value both beliefs. For next year's conference, we're trying to devote an equal amount of time to having both a scholar discuss a topic and a practitioner explain how to do it or teach it to students. This hopefully will take the form of a scholar discussing Appalachian literature, for

example, followed by a teacher sharing how she has used this literature with her students; or scholars discussing quilting or music, followed by practitioners explaining how to quilt or make a banjo with students.

Another problem that teachers identified in their evaluations is the conflict between involving all levels in a workshop, from kindergarten to university, versus making workshops grade-level specific. For the most part, this first conference was organized to mix all levels in each session. This worked to a degree, but several individuals also wanted to meet with teachers on the same level and share with them. For the next conference, we plan to group grade-level areas for the end-of-the-day sharing sessions. This will hopefully allow for both a mix of all teachers earlier in the day as well as give teachers a chance to discuss ideas in terms of the levels they teach, later in the day.

Two other problem areas are the traditional time and money. I have yet to meet a good teacher who has enough time to commit to all of his or her projects. This lack of time affects our group and we're trying to share the workload. And, as with all grant money, one is never sure when or if it will come. I'm in the process of seeking other, more-reliable funding, but this too is not easy to find.

Despite these problems, the Network continues to grow in Southwest Virginia and provide a needed forum for teachers who want to use

Appalachian Studies with their students. Already we are planning next year's conference and putting together our first newsletter which will include a directory, articles and ideas from all level teachers, reviews and hopefully, work from students. Anyone interested in contributing to or receiving the newsletter, please take a flyer or write to me at the English Department of Radford University. And, anyone interested in redefining "higher education" so that it equally values all grades and subjects, please write to the publishers of Webster's Dictionary.