

Course re-ignites teachers' fire

By Karen O'Hara
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Sunnertime. The last place you'd expect to see a teacher is in the classroom.

Yet, here they are, seated around a table at UCSB, scribbling in their notebooks, looking through their well-thumbed texts, engaging in thought-provoking debate.

Their hometowns are as varied as their interests. They come from New Jersey and New York, Pittsburgh and Pierre, Houston and Tucson. One is from Carpinteria, another from Denmark, a third from Poland.

But a common bond has brought them together. This is their idea of a holiday — a way to recharge their intellectual batteries before returning to the classroom in the fall.

For nearly six weeks, they have been dipping into a well of knowledge called "Democracy in America," a book written in the 19th Century by Alexis de Tocqueville, a French social philosopher.

De Tocqueville's work, based on his observations during a visit to America, is widely accepted as a global interpretation of the meaning of American civilization. He believed political democracy and social equality would eventually replace Europe's aristocratic institutions.

"Because the author touched on so many topics of current interest, (from race relations to the power of the presidency) our discussions have ranged between interpreting his original intention and finding applications for his insights and proposals in American life today," said Walter Capps, a UCSB religious studies professor who is leading the seminar.

For the teachers, studying "Democracy in America" is like drinking from a refreshing spring. They say their perceptions are expanding, and they are getting something rich to

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UCSB Professor Walter Capps discusses some of Alexis de Tocqueville's theories on American civilization.

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take back to their students.

"It's inspirational to think these people are all teachers. It's reassuring and stimulating," said Diane Wilson of Houston, Texas, one of the participants.

The seminar is one of 50 summer programs for teachers sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. UCSB was selected as a site for two of the programs — Capps' class and Giles Gunn's course in the English Department on Herman Melville's "Moby Dick."

"The object of focusing on a single text is intellectual enrichment," Capps said, "not pedagogical instruction or curricular planning, although these turn out to be inevitable byproducts."

"This is a highly competitive program. In my view, these folks are the cream on the crop."

The 15 teachers in Capps' seminar didn't know each other when they met six weeks ago. Today, they feel like old friends. As part of the seminar, they have not only studied together, they have traveled together on field trips and lived together under the same roof, the Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority house in Isla Isla.

Several of the participants said they believe the seminar's focus on human aspirations and the need for enlightenment has helped them come to grips with a concern shared by teachers, parents and spiritual leaders.

"Teachers across the country have the the same question I do," said Mellicent Rubin, who teaches history at a private high school in New York. "How do we teach moral values to children?"

Rubin said her study of "Democracy in America" has reinforced her understanding of the importance of religion in American society. For Rubin, the UCSB seminar is a natural follow-up to another endowment-sponsored course she took on the roots of Christianity.

"That course was a catalyst for me in (learning how to) teach in a secular classroom in a sensitive way," she said. "Since then, I've continued to seek out more programs."

Added Wilson, who teaches in a Catholic high school for girls in Houston, "A seminar in which we grapple with moral issues and the governmental system is very relevant to me."

Leba Marquez of North Hollywood, who teaches American literature at an inner-city junior high school, said she also feels she has gained "a clearer understanding

of the role of religion in America."

"A lot of students I work with come from immigrant families," she said. "They bring with them other values. I try to help them broaden their values so they can work within their (American) community."

Marquez she is encouraged to see that literature is being used in the public schools to impart values to students, and that children are finding out what it means to get along through the use of cooperative learning techniques.

Because de Tocqueville reached his conclusions by traveling around the country and engaging citizens in conversation, the seminar participants have done the same, Capps said.

At the Santa Barbara Mission, they discussed the teaching of moral values with priests, nuns and brothers; at the Mt. Calvary Retreat House, they learned about the monastic way of life; they attended Sabbath worship at B-nai Brith Temple; they talked with Vietnam veterans; they interviewed a television news director about freedom of the press, and they studied Solvang by reading about the Danish folk-school movement and meeting with Danes in Santa Ynez Valley.

Their excursion to Solvang was of particular interest to Hans Mi-

kael Holt, who teaches the history of religion in an upper-secondary school in Aarhus, Denmark. He said he was pleased to find that beneath the surface of the tourist shops, there are Danes in Solvang who have retained their regional accents and their cultural heritage.

Holt said he enrolled in the seminar because he has always been fascinated with American history. (He wrote a Danish textbook on the American industrial age of 1870 to 1918.) He believes de Tocqueville's ideas should be "on display in America today."

He said he is impressed by the diversity of American society, and curious about its influence.

"The seminar has given me a better understanding of the dilemma in American civilization and American policy," he said. "On one hand, it's my impression that Americans firmly believe the United States has a certain task on the world scene. It's not just words when Americans talk about fighting for democracy. It's part of their heritage and their fundamental belief."

"I also understand this is a dilemma because you can't decide in a democratic way what is the truth. You have to make a choice. It's the dilemma of a diversified and pluralized society."