

The Common Ground Teachers Institute 2009

Testimonials

- My courses are a combined AP and IB program. I just obtained the topics for the first paper my students wrote last week—an analysis of either a new poem or a new prose piece. This year, the poem was "The Gift" by Li-Young Lee. To be honest, I had not heard of this poet until last summer's seminar; now he is on an international test from Geneva! Such events prove to me the importance of Common Ground. We usually get "caught in a rut" and teach the same works over and over again. IB (and Common Ground) forces us to remain aware of the most contemporary writers internationally.
- [The seminar model] is an exceptional and beneficial way to learn. I enjoy the interaction and "safe environment" small groups afford.
- I love it! The group sizes are large enough to allow for varied points of view but small enough for everyone to be heard.
- I would love to conduct my own classes like a Common Ground seminar.
- Superior leader. Insightful comments. A free flow of ideas was encouraged.
- This is one of the best ways for readers to interact.
- Excellent! Loved it!
- Excellent—a safe environment for exploring vulnerabilities and perhaps, cock-eyed responses.
- Common Ground required a willingness to bear others' views and be (mostly) open to them. I learned to be more open-minded with my own class discussions.
- I always enjoy the challenges of repeated attempts to verbally articulate meaning from art.
- The entire experience was beneficial—the readings, the research, the discussions, and the life applications did what literature does best, which is to open our eyes with greater insight into the world.
- Dr. Muoneke is a deep, thoughtful facilitator who brings so much to the discussions engaged in during the seminar. Hope he comes back every year.
- Dr. Monroe is exemplary. He is organized and has a plan, yet has flexibility to shift those plans. He is gracious in discussion and makes everyone feel to be an asset to the group.
- I wish I could lead a discussion as [Dr. Monroe] does. Nothing is forced; yet when there are gaps, he quietly, efficiently fills in.
- Elizabeth Gregory was tremendous! Her depth of knowledge was inspiring and she encouraged a variety of perspectives.
- Common Ground is wonderful, stimulating, and a renewal of the soul. It is a definite part of my summer each year. The small groups, the wonderful literature, the great food, and the readers during lunch all contribute to a wonderful experience. The best and the brightest are drawn to Common Ground each summer and so we are sharing ideas among the best. The seminar leaders are knowledgeable, inspiring, and wonderful facilitators. The idea that we are all fellows enables much sharing without the feeling it is a class. Long live Common Ground!

The Common Ground Teachers Institute 2008

Testimonials

- I like the intimacy of discussion in a Common Ground seminar—the “freedom” of exchange, the willingness to agree and to disagree, the diversity of experiences to augment an interpretation of a work.
- Please, continue this program that treats teachers as something important. The scholarly, graduate level approach to the examination of the works—free of fees!—is a godsend.
- Excellent! I enjoy the fellowship and conferring with other teachers about literature, and how to teach it to our students.
- The small group seminar is an excellent venue for mature readers who can express themselves without rancor.
- My seminar leader was fabulous. She pushed us to think in depth and embrace new ideas.
- Inspiring. It made me feel as though I were back in college and sitting at a poetry reading.
- The seminar was a great opportunity to dialogue with intelligent people who love to share their perceptions on reading and writing.
- I greatly benefited from the exchange of ideas between teachers and other professionals within a safe and welcoming environment using timely works of literature.
- The wide-ranging readings throughout the seminar exposed me to poets and writers that I will continue to follow!
- Nothing is more powerful than the “testimonials” of teachers who have attended Common Ground. I, myself, plan to shout it from the rafters next spring.
- Our frank and open discussions of the texts together with life connections gave this seminar true transformative power.
- The presentations are a real treat. I like the setting! Such opportunities for creative reflection in such welcoming and comfortable surroundings are extremely scarce.
- Listening to other people’s ideas and approaches to teaching is beneficial. The cohesive nature of new groups made the seminar enlightening and fun.
- The atmosphere was pleasant and welcoming. Our seminar leader (Dr. Monroe) is a brilliant and kind person. The literature we covered was interesting, new and worthwhile. My small group was comprised of inspirational educators. These fellows, I now call friends. Thank you!
- I leave this program as a better educator, a more rounded person, and very motivated for the new academic year!
- Dr. Monroe is a model educator. He is real. He is brilliant.
- Common Ground was truly an eye-opening experience. My seminar has opened my eyes, and refreshed them, for analyzing literature again.

The Common Ground Teachers Institute 2007

Testimonials

- I have thoroughly enjoyed my Common Ground experience. It has broadened my perspective with regard to race and culture issues.
- It introduced me to works I never would have read as well as “forcing” me to read things that were on my “to be read” list.
- One of the most beneficial things about the small group seminar was seeing other viewpoints regarding the novels—good teaching strategies learned over lunch.
- Love the format—group is small enough to get to know everyone and have real discussion.
- It was great to meet people from other campuses/districts; how fabulous to have a forum to read and discuss literature with other professionals.
- What was most beneficial about the small group seminars was hearing about common issues, courses and programs from all the different school districts—hearing about various cultures in all our schools.
- As usual, Dr. Muoneke was articulate and erudite.
- I have not found another literary study to approach the quality of this.
- I like the idea that people from very different backgrounds, schools, academic levels, and cultures come together to offer ideas on the same texts.
- I liked the non-traditional texts (non-American) mixed with the “classic” ones.
- Our group was diverse—in academic backgrounds and in the schools we represent; therefore our perspectives as well as our needs were different. This made for great dialogues.
- Dr. Muoneke was a facilitator. He did not impose his opinions or interpretations upon us, nor did he dominate our discussions. He asked intriguing questions, challenged us, and participated along with us.
- I spend the school year trying to get adolescents to read and talk about literature. Talking to adults who love literature as much as I do, who challenge me about great texts is a great way to spend 2 weeks.
- Common Ground allows participants to express views “outside the box” of accepted intellectual thought.
- Very worthwhile and invigorating.
- Dr. Monroe has a gift for communicating lofty and difficult content with humor, style and grace, creating an open and warm atmosphere even when his views challenge our views.
- There’s nothing like a community of eager and willing learners!
- Common Ground is a blessing for us teachers.

The Common Ground Teachers Institute 2006

Testimonials

- Common Ground is like a form of detox. After all the TAKS testing and finals and grades, you spend the summer reading amazing literature and remembering why you started teaching English in the first place. Then at lunch and after the seminar, you are able to commiserate and celebrate with articulate, caring colleagues. The readings rejuvenate you and show you the result of teaching English. New authors, building the new canon. You leave ready for school and excited to be in the classroom again. I cannot wait to share with my students what I've learned (as a student myself this summer).
- This is definitely the best way to learn! Our whole group benefitted from shared ideas, insights, and research. Never boring!
- My seminar group challenged, supported, and fed each other in ways we all wish our students could experience.
- I thought this was a wonderful opportunity to discuss great literature. Stimulating and challenging.
- I love the size of a Common Ground seminar because everyone is able to contribute and no one is shut out.
- The variety of backgrounds and the depth of commitment to the goals of the institute contributed to a very satisfying experience.
- Dr. Monroe brings insights to the selections and challenges his fellows to “see” literature in new and vibrant ways.
- Bill ran our seminar in a very relaxed manner that allowed freedom of discussion—and he brought us back around to our topic when necessary.
- Elizabeth helped me see the world as others see it. She was open, honest, and inspiring. She sets a selfless, sharing tone. She kept in touch with us every day—that was affirming.
- I cannot say enough about Elizabeth Brown-Guillory. She is fantastic. The topics could have been intimidating, but she encouraged every voice to be heard.

The Common Ground Teachers Institute 2005

Testimonials

- This is an amazing opportunity to work with other educated professionals. I can't wait until next year.
- It's a place to discuss literature and life with intellectual equals—something a teacher doesn't often get to do!
- Romanus Muoneke's point of view and background were invaluable in our discussions; his wisdom, restraint, and patience were admirable; his skill in interjecting trenchant questions was masterful. He is a delight and an honor to have as a leader.
- I found that other teachers provided ideas for the classroom that I can definitely use.
- Dr. Gregory is very diplomatic and is an awesome leader; she keeps us focused.
- FABULOUS! I really enjoyed Dr. Gregory's style of being a facilitator to our discussions instead of being a leader of discussion.
- The small group format makes the discussions very comfortable. Over the two-week time period, the group members became close enough to express opinions without fear, and we can even argue/disagree and not be offended.
- I like the frankness of our discussions. I enjoyed the depth of immersion.
- I find Dr. Monroe supportive and interesting.
- I enjoyed being able to express my views on a variety of topics without being judged or told that my view was wrong.
- The seminars were a good size for fostering a conversation with the text and each other. Excellent selection of texts to mesh with the theme.
- We had a good mix of people in our group. Various ages. People were willing to share personal stories that enriched discussion.
- The most beneficial factor is being able to hear from such a variety of backgrounds and experiences and relating all these variations to the literature.
- We were able to bring classroom topics into the small group along with the novels. I also enjoyed having "adult conversation" about a novel.
- Dr. Monroe is wonderful! He keeps the conversations moving and brings so much outside knowledge that makes the novels more beneficial.
- Romanus has a great love for books and is very conscientious about making Common Ground beneficial for all of us. He is charming and patient—and very knowledgeable. He sets a tone for discussions that encourages participation.

The Common Ground Teachers Institute 2004

Testimonials

- The small-group format is a necessary ingredient that allows The Common Ground Teachers Institute to be meaningful and effective. It provides an avenue for teachers to discuss good literature. This is not usually done through the course of a regular school year.
- Our leader is packed with knowledge and expertise, but he encourages us to share our thoughts and feelings. He makes certain we connect the literature to a common ground. The environment is warm and receiving and is not intimidating.
- More teachers need this kind of summer experience; our students would be the ultimate beneficiaries.
- I enjoy the camaraderie and open nature of my fellows.
- The group is presented with thought-provoking and conversation-starting questions in an environment where people can argue and debate while still respecting others.
- The most beneficial aspect of the small group seminar is that it provides every participant the opportunity to share and be heard. We get to receive a variety of ideas and strategies to use with our students.
- My mind was opened as a reader and a human being by being presented with diverse opinions about singular works.
- The very non-threatening atmosphere encourages me to read, think, dream, and unashamedly share my thoughts. Thanks!
- These meetings are always revealing, exciting, and substantive, and I enjoy the access to the discourse as a contributor and a listener. It is always a rare experience, filled with thought, meaning, and treasure.
- Great exposure to “real, live” authors! The small group sessions were the best. I will spread the word!
- Having works with similar themes is beneficial because new approaches to themes open new vistas in the discussion of those themes.
- The seminar was informative and very enjoyable. I like the relaxed atmosphere and intimate feel of the group. It is nice to have adult conversations about literature.
- I particularly enjoy being able to get together and discuss the novels with others who read and think about what they read.
- Dr. Muoneke is an outstanding and knowledgeable teacher and leader. He guided and promoted much discussion.
- Dr. Thomas is superb at what he does academically, personally, and professionally.
- When I grow up, I want to be like Dr. Monroe! I would like to be around him more often, to absorb all that he knows.
- The small group allows for more interaction and more sharing of ideas both in and out of the classroom.
- This is my favorite out of seven years of Common Ground! My seminar leader is supportive, relaxed, funny, and so informed.
- What a wonderful experience. It gets the mind working again after a summer of gathering cobwebs.

The Common Ground Teachers Institute 2003

Testimonials

- This is a great opportunity to exchange viewpoints with others who love literature and love to discuss ideas.
- I love being introduced to books that I would probably not pick up on my own.
- I am going back to school better prepared to teach literature and with a ton of ideas, stories, and authors to bring into my classes!
- I loved the rapport our group built up over the 2-week session.
- Our seminar was an open exchange of ideas about literature, teaching, and life.
- The size of the group and its diversity stimulated new ways of looking at the literature.
- The intimacy of this small group supports learning and experience that is unmatched by any other format.
- We had an excellent facilitator. She was warm, positive, and extremely well-prepared.
- Dr. Gregory is so eloquent and learned. She is very delicate and graceful in her leading of the group.
- Dr. Thomas was an excellent facilitator and very open-minded. He was great when he played “devil’s advocate” and challenged the popular opinion on certain topics.
- When our group was “stuck” on particular issues, our facilitator could guide us to our own answers.
- Dr. Monroe is the consummate educator!
- Dr. Thomas is so intelligent and funny. He is organized and knows something about everything.
- Dr. Thomas was incredible! He poses excellent questions for discussion. I loved every day!
- I enjoyed hearing different writers during the lunchtime sessions. It was so worthwhile to hear from people with different lives and backgrounds, in order to expand one’s own narrow view.
- The seminar opens up avenues of interest—in both literature and food!
- It is like a breath of fresh air to be able to listen to others and glean valuable teaching aids from one’s colleagues.
- The readings were relaxing, refreshing, and broadening after our intense seminar discussions.
- The laidback, informal book circle discussion allows members to get to know each other well and feel comfortable bringing up personal stories or difficult issues.
- I loved being around so many good, bright people and hearing a variety of views.
- I loved the exposure to so many new ideas, concepts, and people.
- Everyone had good observations that made the authors more accessible.
- We read challenging, interesting, varied books I wouldn’t have read on my own. I would love to come again next year.
- There was a genuine feeling of trust and respect in our group.
- We all learned from each other’s experiences and fields of expertise. I got some valuable ideas for the classroom.
- This experience made me think about writing again.

The Common Ground Teachers Institute 2002

Testimonials

- I loved being introduced to new pieces of literature.
- Being with teachers was wonderful. We were always thinking about how to take these ideas back to the classroom.
- Everybody has the chance to voice ideas about the text. It challenges each participant to develop critical thinking skills.
- Our group had diverse opinions, but everyone listened to each other.
- This seminar has been an excellent format for the exchange of good ideas.
- The enthusiasm of my professor and classroom colleagues was contagious!
- Common Ground is an indispensable venue for teachers to express their ideas and impressions in an atmosphere of collaboration and mutual interest.
- The small group gave everyone a chance to contribute. It allowed us to really explore our diverse ideas.
- The small size of the seminar compels each participant to contribute substantially to the freewheeling exploration of ideas.
- We exchanged ideas and lesson plans in a “round table” discussion atmosphere. Everyone’s ideas were judged equally and fairly.
- We were exposed to good literature, knowledgeable minds, and strong opinions. Everyone gave lots of text support for their ideas.
- Everyone gets to speak in the seminar. There is lots of peer support.
- I was given the chance to discuss literature with people who have different ideas and values, and whom I might not have met otherwise.
- I enjoyed the distinct personalities and varying insights of each of my colleagues.
- Dr. Estess conducts a lively and stimulating seminar.
- Romanus Muoneke is a great mind. He really knows his subject. He’s also a facilitator and knows how to keep the discussion focused.
- Professor Muoneke was very open and accepting of ideas. He allowed us to take the discussion where we wanted it to go.
- Dr. Thomas is an outstanding teacher who has a panoramic grasp of literature and history.
- Lorenzo Thomas is a great discussion leader. The books he assigned were very rich, and the participants were very enthusiastic!
- Thank you, Dr. Gregory! You inspire us!
- I look forward to participating again with another seminar leader. It was fun!
- Lunch was a nice touch!
- The lunchtime presentations were enriching and insightful, helping us to become better teachers.
- The presentation by Arte Publico Press is always valuable.
- Ted Estess’s reading was wonderful!
- Common Ground was very worthwhile—I will definitely reenroll.
- Thank you for the opportunity to participate!