

Closing: Telling Our Story

In general, we have all come to accept the fact that what we do is generally misunderstood by the academy.

—Janice Albert

There is no general story to be told, no synoptic picture to be had. . . . What we can construct, if we keep notes and survive, are hindsight accounts of the connectedness of things that seem to have happened: pieced-together patternings, after the fact.

—Clifford Geertz

It would seem to be an easy task: to explain to the academy at large what we two-year college faculty do. After all, we are products of academic (read four-year) institutions. But so often when speaking to colleagues at four-year schools we are put into Janice Albert's situation: "I have tried to get them to say 'community college,' but it always comes out 'junior'" (1994, 10). We are simply not taken seriously as academics—that is, as scholars or researchers. In their eyes, our work has little to do with the life of the mind. In large part, this book represents an effort to represent community college faculty as deeply reflective and impassioned practitioners.

But, like all journeys that cross borders, this effort, I realize, brings with it great challenges. Have I adequately represented the two-year college teacher and institution? Or have I somehow distorted what I heard and saw to fit my own peculiar bias? Indeed, can I rightly say that I represent those two-year colleagues "back home" at all? Do I want to? Despite nine years of full-time teaching at my two-year college, I remain uncertain about playing such a role. Reviewers' comments on this manuscript, while most helpful, seem to highlight my ambivalence. One reviewer reminds me of the need to locate this work "within a framework that speaks to community college teaching/pedagogy issues" in light of the "significant responsibility" that I have to represent two-year college faculty's "professional and personal concerns." Another reviewer would like me to bring out more clearly certain "issues of teaching in community colleges." These are reasonable demands, to be sure, especially in light of the scarcity of published works authentically representing two-year college faculty.

But, at the same time, I feel the need to speak on behalf of and to all faculty, at two- or four-year schools, who struggle with the issues that we were struggling with during those three weeks in July: achieving perspective on our ways of knowing, reading, and writing; reflecting on the trans-

formative powers of language, both written and spoken; offering our students ways of discovering the truth of things amid the conditional and contingent; and translating our expertise into social action. These are causes that unite all teachers, regardless of level or institution. In portraying two-year college faculty as participants in such a conversation, I hope to bring two-year colleges within the academic fold, rather than to isolate two-year colleges from other segments of higher education. I fear that any further isolation of that sort can only serve to foster more misunderstanding on all sides.

And yet much of what we had to say in those three weeks did seem to address the unique concerns of two-year college faculty: reconciling our specialized knowledge with the two-year college's commitment to general and comprehensive education; initiating students who have had little success in school into the academic enterprise; and reconceiving our work to include both scholarship and teaching.

The fact of the matter is that too few community college teachers are writing about the work that they do. Too often we and our work are constructed by others rather than by ourselves. It is indeed time for more of us who teach at the two-year college level to write about our work: to present papers and to publish. And to do so with confidence and poise.

If my own writing can serve as evidence, however, the task of "getting it right" will be formidable. As I reflect on what I have written about that summer (now more than two years ago), I suspect that I have made it into something quite different from what it was. I felt compelled to piece it all together as seamlessly as possible. Moreover, I felt the need to "situate" this conversation within the ongoing conversations of teachers outside the room, to demonstrate that our concerns may have application beyond the walls of our own particular classrooms and institution. Do not misunderstand what I am saying (and yet how easy it is to be "misunderstood"): the voices that made their way into the document were those that I heard during those three weeks, duly recorded and, oh so laboriously, transcribed. But, as they say, you had to be there: these sessions were more passionate—and digressive—than the story I have told.

Why did I tell the story in the first place? Why not simply be content with what we said and did during those three weeks? As I have said, it is time for two-year college teachers to construct themselves rather than merely to let others do the constructing. It is time to demonstrate both to ourselves and to others that our work and our reflection on that work have an impressive depth and scope.

To a person, each of us remained a determined generalist, committed to the idea of promoting a generally educated citizenry, each of us

clinging to the hope that the picket fences of our particular disciplines might be removed and a common ground revealed.

And yet accompanying that view has been an acknowledgment that perhaps good fences do make good neighbors. Each of us looks at the world through a distinct set of lenses, and has much to offer the other, if only we can articulate what we see and how we see it. This is the rub, of course. So internalized have our disciplines' modes of thinking become that we all struggled during these three weeks to become more cognizant of perceptual frames, the paradigms that govern how we see and think.

We struggled as well when asked to step outside the comfortable zones of our own expertise. Perhaps we needed to feel that discomfort, to slip into the shoes of the uninitiated. We gained from doing so in part because the experience sensitized us to the plight of our students, who labor mightily to decipher the strange languages of the academy.

After the fact, the story of these three weeks can be seen as merely an account of what happened among the people in that room at that time (indeed, one unhappy reviewer of this manuscript likened the work to a "diary of a small circle of friends"). But, having said that, I am reminded of the point made early in the workshop: "All macrohistory is autobiography." As I mentioned earlier, I tried to tell our story within the context of stories told by teachers outside our college, all of which could make up an even larger narrative about what it means to be reflective practitioners.

"It is difficult to know what to do with the past," writes Clifford Geertz, attempting to undermine our clichéd assumptions both that we can capture the past and that we ought to use it productively (1995, 165). And yet, as even Geertz admits, we are enthralled by the opportunity to trace the footprints that memory has left behind. Perhaps the stories that we tell have uses despite their incompleteness. Perhaps they can offer both hope and a sense of renewal. Above all, that may be the legacy of those three weeks in July.