

Introduction: Community College Teachers as Border Crossers

Crossing the border evokes ambivalent images. . . .

—Ruth Behar

To teach at a community college is to be “in translation” or between places. With their mission to provide vocational training and to prepare students for transfer to colleges and universities, community colleges have always had a complex purpose (Cohen and Brawer 1982). That complexity colors instruction at all times. What we teach and how we teach must reflect the diverse needs of our students, the needs of those who plan to transfer to four-year institutions and the needs of those who intend to enter the workplace immediately upon graduating from the community college; the needs of traditionally aged students and the needs of so-called returning students, who have spent years out of school. A poem, for example, must be read and taught to suit the complexities of the community college classroom. How will their histories shade students’ readings?

The task of tailoring instruction to students’ histories and needs has become even more complex as students’ numbers increase. The expansion of community college enrollment since the 1960s has been well documented. As of 1988, when the Commission on the Future of Community Colleges published *Building Communities*, nearly half of all undergraduates in the United States attended community colleges (*Building* 1988).

It is hardly surprising, given the range and complexity of our task, that community college faculty are perceived as overworked. But what usually follows is an assumption that community college faculty are teaching drones, burned-out husks of what we once were, with little time and inclination to stay up-to-date on current scholarship and research. In one recent study, two researchers of the community college scene declared that community colleges were everywhere experiencing an “academic crisis,” their faculty facing the prospects of little promotion and doomed to teach the same courses year after year (McGrath and Spear 1991). Two-year college faculty, they assert, simply have little opportunity to engage in dialogue with colleagues even down the corridor, let alone in other institutions. They spend more and more class time teaching basic or remedial skills, not the college-level courses that they thought they would be teaching when they began. That picture would seem to be supported by a profile done of a single community college during the 1970s, in which

faculty member after faculty member testified to the hindrances to teaching (London 1978). "Sometimes they make life a little difficult," says a math teacher of her students:

and they come in not having read the chapter that was assigned for the week, not even having tried the home work. Then I usually just go back, give a brief lecture, and then we talk our way through the chapter. Sometimes most of them come in unprepared. (117)

While they describe real problems facing community college teachers, such studies yield very little information about the reflection that accompanies the teaching that two-year college faculty do. We rarely see or hear faculty theorizing about their discipline or their teaching (trying to solve, for example, the problem of why students are not reading their texts). In short, we see very little of community college teachers at work—preparing lessons, adjusting to the classroom moment, engaging in thoughtful reflection and dialogue.

The image of community college faculty as workhorse teachers is reinforced in a survey done by the Carnegie Foundation. More than 90 percent polled said that they were more interested in teaching than in research. The question was phrased, "Do your interests lie primarily in research or in teaching?" (Boyer 1990, 44). Given the either/or option, the faculty responded in a way that could be hardly surprising. The problem is that the question perpetuates the illogical separation of teaching and research.

In recent years, certain calls have gone out that we reconsider the nature of research and scholarship, and their relationship to teaching (Boyer 1990; Vaughan 1994; Tinberg, "Border-Crossings" 1993). Ernest Boyer, an influential voice, has called for a "scholarship of teaching" (1990, 23). Some have actually argued that we see classroom activities as the fit subject of research in its own right. In composition studies, methods borrowed from fields such as psychology and anthropology—the case study, the oral history, the ethnography—have had an important impact (Kantor, Kirby, and Goetz 1981; Calkins 1985). With the renewed emphasis on teaching (as opposed to research) and on cross-disciplinary learning, such classroom research has inspired a tremendous amount of interest in a short time (Angelo and Cross 1993; Goswami and Stillman 1987; Daiker and Morenberg 1990; Ray 1993).

But such calls have the net effect of further segregating teaching from another, more privileged form of research and scholarship (which Boyer renames "the scholarship of discovery" [17]). Classroom research runs the danger, in my view, of being the things that teachers do when they can't do the "right" kind of research.

More interesting and more profound have been attempts to engage in, to use Henry Giroux's metaphor, "border crossings" (Giroux 1992). By that Giroux means excursions between distinct disciplines and between distinct ways of knowing. The old walls, the old borders between one field and another, simply have lost their usefulness. Giroux argues for a pedagogy centered on "new languages capable of acknowledging the multiple, contradictory, and complex positions people occupy" (21). "Central" to this new pedagogy, he writes, "is the importance of challenging, remapping, and renegotiating those boundaries of knowledge" (26). What this remapping involves is viewing our own disciplines through the lens of another: to wear the difference, as it were, and, in the process, achieve some common ground.

To remap the terrain of knowledge—as ambitious as that might sound—ought to be the goal of teachers who want to engage in scholarship and research. To discover a language that partakes of "border talk" ought to be the means and the end of our inquiry. By "border talk" I mean a language that has currency across the divides between disciplines and institutions, between the local and the global, the practical and the theoretical, the private and the public, the two-year college and the research university. The walls remain, but the translation between becomes the thing.

The work that follows is an attempt at translation, a translation of the work and talk that teachers do. I intend to report what I observed when several colleagues from a variety of disciplines at my community college, along with a group of peer tutors, came together in the summer of 1994 to talk about writing, reading, and knowing. After serving during the previous semester as staff for our college's writing lab, we could now reflect on what we had learned and what we had yet to learn.

My mode of discourse will be as mixed as the border talk heard during those sessions: narratives, journals, and interviews will complement the traditionally academic analysis and argument. The personal will complement the public. As Mary Louise Pratt informs us, personal narratives are as much part of the ethnographic tradition as so-called "objective . . . practices" and much is to be gained from the mingling of the two (1986, 32). Indeed, postmodern ethnographers derive their authority from being part of the picture rather than outside of it (Rosaldo 1993). The truths that emerge from such work, argues James Clifford, are "inherently *partial*—committed and incomplete," but nonetheless authoritative (1986, 7). As I have argued elsewhere, teachers—no matter the institution or discipline—are implicated in their classroom narratives (Tinberg, "Border-Crossings," 9). Decisions that they make—from text selection and syllabi

to the arrangement of seats in a circle—influence what happens in their classrooms.

The account that follows will contain many voices, the voices of those engaged and thoughtful colleagues who shared their time and their concerns during our summer sessions. They talked frankly about teaching in their disciplines—and did so with an informed expertise that was truly impressive.

Community college faculty are in a prime position to initiate such an exchange across borders because we live on the borders, as it were. We work in the space between the schools and the universities. In our teaching, we traverse the middle ground between the needs of those who will transfer to the university and those who will enter the working world directly from our classes. Many of us, indeed, have partaken of both the academic and the workaday worlds ourselves. Jerry, from our college's mathematics department, recalled to me the days he drove a truck for a living:

I drove a truck and made deliveries. These guys called me “teach” even back then, because I had a high school education. Some of them were totally illiterate. By the way, the tags on the bags were color-coded so they could load the right things on the truck.

It is an experience that he continues to draw on as a way to engage his students who are

out working in machine shops, driving a truck, out on fishing boats. If you can understand the problems that these people are facing right now—and I did it all the way through college, working fifty to fifty-five hours a week when I was in college—if they can understand that you care, they will get something from you. They will understand that your experience is the same as theirs and that you have gone beyond them and that you have something to offer them.

Marlene, a historian, recalls vividly her days working in a factory, which was an attempt to understand the very workers whose lives she was committed to improving. Raised in the upper-middle-class community of Shaker Heights, Ohio, Marlene noted that her father was a high school dropout who had been forced to go to work during the Depression. She observed that she and her family never quite “fit in” in what she called the elitist community where she was raised. The tumultuous political movements taking place in the 1960s showed her that others shared her experience and provided the catalyst for her desire to improve the lot of others.

In a certain sense, we community college faculty are quintessentially postmodern. We possess no single identity, but rather have shifting and blurred identities. Like the subject of postmodern anthropology, we move

in a variety of worlds. We are the educational “mestizas,” the translatable teachers. I am reminded of what the anthropologist Ruth Behar observes about writing as a woman ethnographer (who happens also to be a Cuban-born Jew):

The feminist ethnographer is a dual citizen, who shuttles between the country of the academy and the country of feminism. She’s an odd kind of bilingual woman. To her subjects she speaks in a tongue bristling with seductive promises that she will not be able to keep. To her colleagues, she must speak in a way that will persuade them that “working” on another woman is a contribution to the discipline she has vowed to serve; they will ultimately judge her work on the basis of how well she can translate the other woman’s tongue into a language they can understand. (1993, 297–98)

My goal, in the ethnography to follow, is to shuttle between places in an “odd kind of bilingual” dance—between theory and practice, between teaching and research, between one discipline and another. We will hear discussions ranging from the theoretical question of how we know what we know to the more grounded terrain of what we must do in our classrooms and in our writing centers to improve student writing.

As I sit here at my computer writing this chapter, I am thinking back on what it is like to occupy the space between. A Ph.D. steeped in literary theory and trained in the traditional canon, I strain here and in my classroom to find a language that has currency for theorists as well as for practitioners. I publish, I give papers at professional conferences, and I teach. I work to connect all these activities; I try to translate them across borders. In my professional writing, I try to strike a balance between the public and the private, the academic and the expressive, the abstract and the classroom-based. In my teaching, I seek to use theory as guide to my practice and look to practice to engender theory.

But in bringing theory to discussions of classroom practice at my community college, I run the risk of being seen as “too good” for this place, too high-powered, too Ph.D. (I have actually been told by colleagues that it was only a matter of time before I “moved on.”) And as a community college teacher who writes often about my classroom experiences I often run the risk of not seeming scholarly enough to pass muster in professional journals. As I struggle along the borders, I see myself as occupying a “contact zone,” the place where, according to Pratt, cultures interact and influence each other. The language that emerges from such a zone “interlock[s] understandings and practices” (1992, 7).

Looking back at our summer workshop, I now see that we were straining to produce that very kind of language ourselves. It was not simply that

we were looking to find a common language with which to talk about writing and knowing (as generalists, we felt quite comfortable with the notion). We were also attempting to see whether we could translate to one another the differences that defined us as teachers of psychology, nursing, dental hygiene, literature, history, business, mathematics, and ESL. In my mind, that was the greater challenge.

Essentially, we were to focus, during the workshop, on three questions: What does it mean to write and know in the disciplines? How do we respond effectively to the writing our students do in our courses? And, finally, what do we need to say and do when tutoring students outside of the classroom (when they visit our writing lab)? In answering these questions, we hoped to produce two important documents (which we called “communiqués): a revised statement of “primary traits” or what constitutes “good writing” at our college (building on the statement generated by colleagues at a similar workshop held the previous summer), and a tutoring protocol describing ways to facilitate student learning in a tutoring session.

It was an open question as to whether we would be comfortable talking about discipline-specific ways of writing and knowing. After all, here we were, committed to the community college mission, committed to the mission of general education. Although we were trained to teach our own specialized subject areas, we also saw ourselves as giving students reading, writing, and thinking skills to enable them to flourish in the workplace as well as in academic settings. Does a specialized view of knowledge and knowledge making truly apply to teaching at the community college? we asked ourselves. Are we interested in promoting this specialized view of knowledge or a more generalized or transferable view? “Everything that rises must converge,” wryly observed Peter, from the English department. His point was that disciplinary knowledge, if it is to be humane and useful, must offer common ground. And yet, as we talked among ourselves and drew from our own disciplinary perspectives, we asked whether there were disciplinary boundaries or categories that define the work we do, boundaries or categories that perhaps we should make explicit to our students. Marlene, a historian, and Chris, from the psychology department, had the following exchange on the matter:

Marlene: Students will ask, “What do you mean, ‘define the Renaissance’?” Well, was it the same for the peasants as it was for the elite? The more I talk the more I elaborate but I am also letting out the the choices for them. . . . I don’t have a concept of where I want them to arrive.

Chris: I think you did, from what you were just saying. What you wanted them to do was bring class analysis to answer that question. An economic analysis of the question of the Renaissance. That's actually one of your categories. One of the lenses through which you want your students to see history.

Although class analysis does not belong solely to the study of history, it is for Marlene an important “lens” through which *she* views history. The question for Marlene as an instructor becomes whether she is willing and able to articulate that perspective to her community college students, to lay it out there from the start. Marlene, for her part, construes the act of “giving” her students this kind of information as somehow restricting their choices. She operates from an instinct that most community college teachers have, which is to teach in a way that does not exclude—to produce, in essence, generally educated students. And yet her expectations of students’ responses to that assignment seem to be shaped by a class or economic perspective.

Articulating disciplinary ways of knowing, Judith Langer tells us, is no simple or easy task (1992, 83). I might add that it becomes especially challenging at the community college. Not only must we be able to view and understand our discipline’s conceptual categories but we must then render them in a language that is useful in the classroom. But even beyond these considerations—as intimidating as they are—is the concern that Kathy, our ESL specialist, raised: “At the two-year college level, how many of our students are actually being asked to write as a historian writes? or asked to write like a psychologist? How much of this is going to be practical at the two-year college?” The need to be “practical,” to focus on what works for our students and for the careers and lives they face outside our classrooms, becomes the driving force for a great many of us who teach at the community college. The question then becomes this: Can we at the community college offer knowledge that is *both* specialized and generally useful? We had plenty on our plate.