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Writing a Book on the (Two-Year College) Job

HOWARD TINBERG

ON THE face of it, the title of this essay seems palpably absurd. What two-year college faculty member has the time and energy to write a book? At my college and throughout the public higher education system in Massachusetts, where the talk is of increasing our “workload productivity,” the notion of writing a book poses a special challenge. My view is that we must find a space, in all the other work that we have, to do both the reading and writing that allow us to thrive professionally. I realize the hard reality that so many of us at the two-year college are being pressured to do more at a reduced rate of compensation. The story about research and publication that I tell here is my own and that of a group of colleagues with whom I have worked. But its message of opportunity, discovery, and renewal might come to be the story of other community college faculty members as well.

Under a federal Title III grant, our college set up a multidisciplinary writing lab ten years ago. I was given the position of faculty coordinator and the responsibility of training and supervising the lab’s faculty tutors, who were drawn from each of the college’s academic divisions to promote writing across the curriculum. As tutor and director, I got the opportunity to read assignments generated in a variety of academic areas—gaining a perspective that few faculty members have. At the time I did not realize how momentous a shift this would be in terms of my role both within and outside the English department that I had joined four years earlier. I would spend most of my time away from the department, although I would be expected to teach some courses in it and to attend department meetings.

I felt between things—between the academic area and the developmental education area, which houses most of our tutoring services; between the liberal arts and the vocational elements (like business and nursing) of our college’s curriculum; and between those who see themselves first as teachers of literature and those who see themselves first as teachers of writing. I didn’t feel comfortable in this position. Ethnogra-

phers refer to the language of exotic communities as “illicit discourse” (Marcus 119), a phrase that seems appropriate in describing what I began to hear from colleagues. Suddenly I listened, with some embarrassment and considerable defensiveness, to what “they” had to say about us English department folks. And it was with a mixture of amusement and incredulity that I heard what my English department had to say about “them.” I liken what I experienced to what writing tutors face when students ask that they take sides—with the students and against the narrow-minded instructor who sent them to the center. Are you with us or against us?

Rather than give in to this narrow and simplistic dichotomy, I wondered whether being in between was such a bad thing after all. I did a little reading to learn more about being in between. The radical educator Henry Giroux, in *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education*, said that it can offer a unique vantage point, painful and disturbing though that position may be. In some strange way, such a perspective serves as a model for our students, who so often are caught between two disparate communities and who need to be able to negotiate the demands of each. Additional reading of the works of anthropologists, especially Clifford Geertz (*After the Fact* and *Local Knowledge*), Renato Rosaldo, and Ruth Behar, provided me with added insights on the role of the participant-observer, who is both engaged in a subject of study and distant from it. Behar particularly intrigued me, since she consistently writes of her own divided sense of being: as a woman writing in a

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man's field, as a Jew in a Gentile world, and as both Cuban and American. A child of European Jews displaced after the Second World War, I could sympathize with her predicament.

All this reading and thinking still seemed terribly theoretical, until I began to see my work in a context larger than that of the writing lab, the department of English, indeed the curriculum itself—that is, until I began to see myself as a two-year college teacher. As such, wasn't I in between things: high school and college, the academic and the vocational, the liberal arts and business areas, disciplinary content and developmental education? How did that make me feel? How did I feel when students came to my classroom thinking that they were in grade 13, an extension of high school? How did it make me feel when colleagues at four-year schools viewed my work as less significant than theirs? Angry and upset and willing to write through those feelings.

Write what? What could I do or say that would be worthy of publication? These are all variants of questions that we hear our students asking. Yet they are questions that many of us who teach at the two-year college constantly ask ourselves, in part because we have internalized a view of ourselves that others constructed for us: that we are teachers first, writers and scholars last. How else can I explain the defensiveness that I hear from colleagues when the subject of writing comes up? In my work with faculty members from the English department in our writing lab, I hear this defensiveness all the time—not in loud assertions but in meaningful pauses when the subject of their writing is raised. When did we start separating the writing (and reading, for that matter) from our teaching and learning? Why must talented and bright colleagues constantly sell themselves short as writers? I suspect that much of this distrust is a residue of graduate school, where, as we well know, the act of writing is almost always secondary to critique and the process of composing done under great personal duress. I also suspect that there is something in the culture of the two-year college that works against the intellectual work of written scholarship and research. Like many of our students, we may think so little of our capabilities and of the work we do that writing about our accomplishments simply doesn't seem worthwhile.

As I sorted out ideas of what to write about, it occurred to me that the very busyness of my work, the thickness of my days, might be the subject for an extended study. As part of my work in our college's

writing lab, I design and facilitate an intensive two-week workshop for faculty tutors in writing in the disciplines. I had already been through one of these workshops and found it utterly exhilarating (and exhausting). All of us finally had some time to think about the work we do. We reflected on questions such as, What does it mean to think and write in our own disciplines and the disciplines of others? and How do we read and evaluate student writing? More profoundly, we asked, How do we come to know the things we know? At the end of a long day and a long workshop, one of the workshop participants, a colleague from the history department, met me in our parking lot as he was pulling out and said, "You know, you should find a way of letting others know what went on here, how special this was." He was speaking mostly about our administrators (an important audience of the book, as it turned out), who in time would have to decide whether to fund the workshop and lab as part of the college budget. But our conversation got me to think about a larger audience—college faculty members and administrators interested in the teaching of writing, reading, and thinking. I began to consider ways of getting the word out about next summer's workshop.

The plan I eventually hit on was to tape-record that workshop from beginning to end, transcribe the conversations, and offer my analysis of what was said. I spent the month after the workshop transcribing the tapes, and I wrote as much as I possibly could the following summer (even working during an Advanced Placement essay reading that I attended in Lincoln, Nebraska). The idea of reporting on a single event occurring over a fairly limited amount of time grew out of my reading of Geertz, who introduced me to the anthropologist's practice of offering a "thick description" of cultural events ("Thick Description"). What if I and my reader were able to get into the thick of those workshop conversations? What if I were able, then, to explore layer after layer of meaning in those conversations? Implicit in the thick-description model is a respect for what Mary Louise Pratt has called "fieldwork in common places." The day-to-day events of our teaching lives merit recording and publication. Scholarship and research and their publication do not have to focus on the esoteric and the theoretical. Theory can emerge from the particulars of daily experience. As classroom teachers, we can all engage in such fieldwork-research by keeping reflective journals. We can tell the story of what happens in our classroom—what worked

as well as what didn't—and pose questions that yield important insights, questions like, What did I intend to achieve with this assignment? What exactly was the outcome? How do I account for that outcome? What changes, if any, do I plan to make and why?

We may well ask, as I asked, Will anyone be interested in what happened here on a particular day? One of the referees of my book's proposal reminded me of this question when he asked what I could do to make this project more than a “diary of a small circle of friends” (Tinberg 73). The comment meant that research intended for publication—especially research that is deeply and richly experiential—must be placed in a broader context than the classroom or the workshop. Thick descriptions must involve deepening layers of abstraction: the language of particular rituals and customs take on a symbolic significance.

Looking back, I wish now that I had written more about the contexts that framed our discussions in that summer workshop seven years ago and that framed the discussions I witnessed in the years that followed. I wish I had said more about the community in which my colleagues teach and from which our students come: the fascinating mix of ethnic cultures that is southeastern Massachusetts, the astounding high school dropout rate in the area, the predictably high rate of unemployment, and the remarkable motivation on the part of many students to succeed in school the second time around. And I wish I had written more about Bristol Community College itself, whose role in that part of the commonwealth is so vital. I have never worked among such a dedicated and complicated set of faculty and staff members. Despite stagnant salaries, despite the numbing effects of prolonged contract negotiation, the faculty members continue to teach with passion and innovation. Yet how different colleagues are one from the other: some have roots in the working class, others are solidly middle-class; some were the first in their family to go on to college, others were expected by family tradition to attend college; some had MAs, others had PhDs; some had degrees from the state college down the road, others had degrees from Ivy League schools. I could have written a book about all this—and probably should have.

I clearly had a lot to write about, but for whom? And for what purpose? I admit that for the longest time I imagined my readers as the colleagues who sat around the seminar table in room D209 with me for those three weeks. What would they say when they read accounts of themselves, read their words as I had

transcribed them? I needed above all to be true to that audience. I felt a little like an anthropologist in a well-known photograph: as the researcher is writing up the field notes, the informants look over the researcher's shoulder, curious to see what is being made of them (Clifford and Marcus ii).

Yet I was convinced that colleagues other than those sitting around that seminar table might also be interested in our conversations. Most teachers of writing should be interested in topics like Responding to Student Writing or in questions like, Is assessing writing possible? and What is good writing? I imagined this work speaking to two- and four-year college teachers alike. That is how I pitched the project to the National Council of Teachers of English. The NCTE eventually accepted the proposal and published the book. As I was revising the work, a referee who had seen early drafts of the manuscript urged me to place my colleagues' discussions “within a framework that speaks to community college teaching/pedagogy.” Another requested that I bring out more clearly “issues of teaching in community colleges” (Tinberg 71). From that point on, I felt considerable pressure to aim the book at two-year college faculty members, a goal that seemed reasonable, given my years as a two-year college teacher and the fact that the workshop described in the book took place at a two-year college and was attended only by its faculty members. But I was beginning to feel as if the walls were moving in and that others had pretty much concluded where and by whom this book should be read. Would that group of readers include writing center directors and tutors? Though the book recorded the conversation of faculty members who worked in our writing lab, probably not. Yet even as I felt the narrative in some sense narrowing, I sensed that, in focusing on the story of two-year college teaching, *Border Talk* took on the some of the power and the poignancy of two-year college work. Maybe this was the story that I was meant to tell, after all. When it came time to write the closing chapter, “Telling Our Story,” all my doubts had dissipated. It had become clear to me by then that if we two-year college teachers didn't tell our story, others far less vested in the community college mission would attempt to do it for us. And that was unacceptable.

For many of us at the two-year college, telling our story may be—alongside the desire to engage in a professional conversation beyond our campuses—the key factor in whether or not we write for publication. Many, perhaps most, of us do not receive points toward

professional development or promotion on the basis of our published writing or conference presentations. Perhaps that practice will change as institutions come to value and understand the phrase “the scholarship of teaching” as broad and inclusive and devise a framework by which to redefine and reward the work that the two-year college faculty member does. Teaching will always matter, but it should not exclude the essential development that only a broader professional conversation can enable in the teacher.

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By the end of the second year a restlessness came over Ruth, impelling her to spend most of the day walking. The work seemed to her too easy and she had already chosen the subject for her dissertation: "Vice and Virtue in Balzac's Novels". Balzac teaches the supreme effectiveness of bad behaviour, a matter which Ruth was beginning to perceive. In the two parts of the Cambridge English: First Writing paper, you have to show that you can write different types of text in English. There are two parts and you have 1 hour and 20 minutes to complete both parts. What's in part 1? If our job has few holiday periods during the year, maybe we can accept a higher salary in exchange. On the whole, I am of the opinion that in order to be happy, the salary is less important than enjoying the job. However, it is difficult to be happy working for peanuts. Our fitness magazine is looking for contributors to write an article on how to stay fit when you are a college student. So if you have any cool ideas, send us an article in which you:

- Explain the type of exercise you recommend
- Recommend a healthy but cheap diet
- Give other ideas you like.

Spend two weeks or a month in small classes, improving your English while you paint, make music, play tennis, volleyball, etc., and take part in many other activities. Examination course 2. For students over sixteen, these courses last six months, and are part-time in the first three months, with a choice of afternoon leisure activities, changing to full-time for the second three months, with increased homework as the examination approaches. Family summer school. These one, two or three-month courses take place from January to March and are aimed at students who wish to improve particular language skills. Listening, writing, reading and speaking are all offered, together or separately. Students are not advised to take more than two skills in one month. Get around in English.