What a Long, Strange Trip It's Been: Becoming a Community College Professor

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TRACY Wang, assistant professor of mathematics at Raritan College, was once embarrassed to be teaching at a community college, but not anymore: "We have a saying in China that if you want to teach one drop of knowledge to your students, you have to have a gallon. Nobody is overqualified to teach at a community college" (Haworth A13).

Wang represents the changing face of community college faculty members: the bicultural professor, trained in research and charged with teaching. The new PhD who chooses to teach at a community college and the community college that values the PhD both must consciously recognize the necessary process of acculturation—not unlike the process an immigrant must go through. The issues that are most stark when one makes the transition to teaching at a community college are also apparent (though not as recognized) when one moves into other teaching positions: the tension between the desire to do research (for which our degrees have prepared us) and the desire to be an effective teacher (a skill that we learn by the seat of our pants). Thus a certain period of alienation from one's past and perhaps from one's present is a necessary evil.

Nonetheless, the transition from graduate school to a community college may be particularly rocky because of the biases, expectations, and cultural attitudes toward research and teaching that are innately a part of our graduate school training, particularly within the humanities. When placed in the context of social and economic class, the biases have greater significance: how does the working-class graduate student, who has finally made it to the PhD level and has returned to her roots, so to speak, choosing to teach students who remind her of herself and see her as a success, respond to academic colleagues and mentors who see her as settling for less?

In the literature on community college faculty members, one recurring theme is problematic faculty role adaptation (Henderson 28). Because community colleges are responsible to their communities, they are constantly accommodating to local needs, requiring faculty members to "redefine their roles in relationship to new goals and objectives" (31). Community colleges are hybrid organizations harboring a wonderful variety of students and missions. The necessarily ongoing process of acculturation can be difficult for PhDs who accept jobs at community colleges without recognizing that the various roles they will play are vastly different from the role modeled for them by their graduate school professors.

Although I have been attending regional and national MLA conferences for the last decade, rarely have I felt at home: many colleagues look askance at me when they see Central Oregon Community College on my name tag. But I persevere because I do not want to lose my
connection to a group that promotes literary scholarship, something I do enjoy. Despite my experiences, now is the best time for community college teachers to encounter the MLA. It is only recently that the MLA has begun to recognize the specific challenges that PhDs at community colleges must face and how important it is to include community college faculty members in national disciplinary discussions. And more community college instructors are finding a place in the MLA. Although no precise statistics are kept, it is estimated that approximately 7.5% of MLA members are community college instructors. Now that we are officially here, we need to respond to the MLA's recent call for doctorates to consider teaching at the community college. But I do have a warning: not every PhD will be successful at a community college.

The most important rule, one that must be repeated over and over before ever stepping into a community college classroom, is that you must have an understanding of and a belief in the community college's mission. You must enjoy working with a variety of students, all fabulously talented in their own way, and gain satisfaction from an often diverse, heavy, and constantly changing workload. Although my colleagues at traditional four-year colleges have a variety of students, most of their students are between eighteen and twenty-two years of age and have recently completed high school. At many community colleges, the average age is close to thirty, and the educational backgrounds of students in the same class vary from those with a fifth-grade reading level to those who succeeded in advanced placement classes.

In my first year teaching at an urban community college, I was introduced to students whose entire lives were culturally, educationally, and economically very different from my own. Maria was a Haitian immigrant who began college by enrolling in the lowest level of developmental writing during an intensive precollege summer. Over the next year, she continued to take English courses with me, until she completed the writing requirements by the end of her second year. Two years later, while working full-time and raising four children, she earned her degree in respiratory therapy. Dwayne, who never let me forget that he lived in a different part of Brooklyn (the "real" Brooklyn, he'd say), always came to class ready to pick a fight, baseball cap on backwards before it was cool—but he always came to class. In that same class were the "Jamaican girls," as these women, all in their forties and fifties, called themselves. Struggling with comprehension problems while reading the stories of Tillie Olsen, they were eventually rewarded with the pleasant surprise of seeing their lives reflected in her stories. Each term I reworked every course plan in an attempt to reach as many students as I could: it was a very rewarding challenge that continues today.

The acculturation process for the PhD at a community college requires flexibility: learning new values, attitudes, and behaviors and accepting the changes as they come. But this process isn't so smooth for the PhD who has been trained to see community college teaching as temporary drudgery.

The implicit expectation at the graduate school I attended in the early 1990s was that we would get a job at least in a BA-granting college. Mock interviews and c.v. preparation were geared to the MLA interview— a process in which few community colleges participate. Explicitly, however, my graduate school recognized the changing world of academia. It offered incoming students in
1988 not just an adjunct position teaching at a branch campus to earn money but also a one-semester internship that included taking a class called the Teaching of College English.

My training at an urban, eighteen-thousand-student community college lasted seven years, the last year in a full-time, non-tenure-track position. After the first semester, I became a regular adjunct (the distinction between intern and adjunct being one of name only) teaching the maximum load of two courses per term, including summers. I started teaching at this urban community college one week before my graduate school career began. Thus my acculturation as a graduate student and as an instructor at a community college occurred simultaneously. From the start, I felt like an immigrant to both worlds, desperately hoping to be accepted by the academic world, yet slowly realizing that I began to see myself first as a teacher and second as a graduate student. Curiously, I felt more at home in the community college than in the graduate school. The challenging yet intellectually vibrant atmosphere of the City University of New York community colleges (which have been hiring PhDs for several decades) was more exciting to me than what I perceived as the elitist graduate school atmosphere. The pains and rewards of teaching were so much more immediate than the rewards--and there are many--of graduate school. Ultimately, by choosing to put more of my energy into teaching, I saw myself succeeding both as a teacher and as a career professor at a community college.

Unlike fellow graduate students such as Christina Boufis, author of the article "Why I Didn't Get That Community College Job," I recognized that my one-semester internship at a local community college was not just a way to earn money but was a major part of my PhD training. Of course, community colleges should not be seen merely as training grounds for beginning four-year professors--it's insulting even to consider that. As Boufis discovered, many PhDs do not realize how valuable an experience it can be to face the challenges of teaching and advising community college students no matter what type of position one ultimately chooses. I have found that community colleges welcome teacher-scholars who are committed to the institution, and they quickly see through those PhDs who are just treading water till that magical two-load position at a Carnegie classification Research I or II university (a mere 3% of all higher education institutions) appears.

Janice Albert notes, "I have tried to get them to say 'community college,' but it always comes out 'junior'" (10). Yet despite such a prejudice, all colleges in the United States teach first- and second-year students, and the best way to teach introductory students should vary little no matter the course or the type of institution: the goal is to foster intellectual curiosity through active learning and arranging the course so that it moves toward engaging the student in higher-order thinking beginning with comprehension and continuing to interpretation, application, and analysis. And because of the diversity of students found at a community college, the added challenge is to reach students with a variety of learning styles that may not fit into the traditional system of listening, taking notes, regurgitating facts on a test, or modeling in an academic essay. Writing, discussion, problem solving, simulations, role-playing, case studies, and visuals must be considered to reach the broadest student audience possible. For example, a typical day in my Native American literature and culture class might look like this:
A brief discussion of Black Elk's and Charles Eastman's different portrayals of the Wounded Knee battle: students come to class prepared to discuss those portrayals, and I ask them to write down some of the key differences before we begin our discussion.

We watch the Wounded Knee segment from the PBS documentary *The West*.

Students work in groups comparing the PBS version with Black Elk's and Eastman's.

Groups present their results, and we brainstorm explanations for the disparities in the presentations.

Students are asked to do a more complex analysis, this time comparing the role of Navajo oral tales in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* with the role of Chippewa tales in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*.

The assignment works because it models several necessary skills (close reading, comparative analysis) and it allows students with different strengths or different learning styles to successfully participate and learn. Despite mockery of these student-centered techniques in some recent publications, such as *Generation X Goes to College* (Sacks), preparing active and multifaceted classes like this on a daily basis is vital for effective teaching at the community college level.

Another challenge for community college instructors is that we often have a very heavy advising load. We need to understand the unique challenges faced by most community college students. There's a need for an open-door policy at various times to meet the needs of day and evening students. I often find myself spending at least an hour with new advisees (with several follow-up visits), listening to their needs, going over their past academic history, introducing them to the college culture, explaining the various choices they have and responsibilities they must face to succeed in college. Such intense advising of many students is not the norm at most four-year colleges, and it is one of the major reasons why many of my colleagues choose to leave community college teaching.

I'm convinced, however, that this complex of skills would also be valuable at a traditional four-year college, especially if the goal is effective teaching. Perhaps the difference is merely that at a community college, the need for such broad-based knowledge and skills is more apparent, openly discussed, and widely accepted.

"To teach at a community college is to be 'in translation' or between places," according to Howard Tinberg (vii). As an instructor with a doctorate, I am often perceived as tough by my students, while peers and family wonder why I bothered to get the degree in the first place. Yet the PhD can act as vital bridge for those students who will continue their education. As a study by the Commission on the Future of Community Colleges notes, in 1988 nearly one half of all undergraduates in the United States attended community colleges, and the number is closer to 75% in 1999 (AACJC). It's mighty crowded in the "in between" place.

Long before the MLA formally acknowledged that the job market in the humanities requires PhDs to consider alternative careers, many of my colleagues who are PhDs chose the benefits of working at a community college over a four-year college: many community colleges have an intellectually vibrant atmosphere without the tensions associated with the publish-or-perish syndrome and with the reward of being valued for good teaching. At the 1999 MLA convention,
several sessions (out of several hundred) were specifically geared to issues related to community college teaching and faculty. I applaud this interest and I hope the number of sessions continues to grow. Of course, for this to happen two events must occur: the MLA needs to continue to find ways to make itself more receptive to community college faculty members, and community college faculty members need to participate more actively in the MLA. The PhD who wants to teach and to continue academic scholarship should do both. PhDs need to use their critical and analytical skills to write, present, and publish on those issues in which they are experts: pedagogy and the intersection of theory and practice. Traditionally, community college faculty members have been unable or unwilling to write about and publish what they know and have learned. It's time to change that. Community college research often crosses between disciplines and institutions, between the local community world and the global world, between theory and practice. Tinberg calls it "border talk."

Like many of our students, community college faculty members with PhDs have shifting identities—particularly postmodern, in Tinberg's words (x). Tinberg augments my immigrant metaphor by noting that PhDs at a community college are bilingual, able to speak with other disciplines, to speak teacher talk and research talk, to address both the theoretical and the practical. Tinberg's goal is to connect all, to encourage us to be the translators, to reach a balance—and it is his hope that other community college teachers (as well as teachers at research universities) will do the same.

At the same time, the call for improving teaching at four-year colleges and universities (including graduate schools, where teaching is often mediocre) should not threaten PhDs who prefer to do research. We need to think about the relation between teaching and researching as symbiotic. Good teachers are engaged in the ongoing debates in their fields (and in the larger society as well); good researchers should be able to disseminate their ideas (and their continuing questions) to an audience larger and more substantial than the academy. The tension between teaching and researching serves to elevate researchers while denigrating teachers—an obvious symptom of class stratification.

Admittedly, for most community college teachers the call for maintaining contact with the ongoing debates in their fields is laughable. Many community colleges have no faculty development programs. Most community college faculty members are burdened with large classes and heavy teaching loads. Teachers often rate the intellectual environment and encouragement of scholarship at these institutions as poor or fair, according to the 1988 study Building Communities: A Vision for a New Century (American Association of Community and Junior Colleges Commission on the Future of Community Colleges). Thus to continue the trend of hiring PhDs, community colleges need to change: they need to focus on recruitment, selection, development, training, and retraining. They must improve and rebuild faculty intellectual culture, creating a community of lifelong learners, while maintaining financial support for and access to university-level libraries. They must encourage faculty members to make connections with both high school and university teachers and participate in national conversations, since community college teachers, particularly those with high school teaching experience and PhDs, are in a unique position to smooth the process for student learning. And four-year colleges as well as organizations like the MLA need to continue their outreach.
Michael Bérubé asks an interesting question in his book *The Employment of English*: "Is advanced literacy [training in the 'possibilities and varieties of interpretation'] as necessary to a democratic polity as is basic literacy, and does advanced literacy have anything to do with the cause of social justice?" (144). Community college students are those who may not have otherwise been exposed to the advanced literacy that makes them more critical readers of all the texts in our world. Bérubé argues that social justice is one purpose of literary study, but it is also why I teach compositional literature at a community college. Yes, advanced literacy and the disciplining of one's mind are also paths toward class mobility and economic independence and perhaps even a fulfilling career--or, as Bérubé points out, quoting from *Educating Rita*, "better songs to sing" (163). That's why I worked for a PhD, that's why community college students confront their fears to go to school, and that's why immigrants immigrate.

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**Works Cited**


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