FOOTNOTES, FERTILIZER, AND FINE ARTS: HISTORICAL TEACHING TECHNIQUES IN A JUNIOR COLLEGE

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Known by a variety of names, such as junior colleges, community colleges, comprehensive colleges, institutes, and the like, it is no small wonder that American two-year colleges continue to be subject to misconception and misunderstanding. Given the diverse role and scope of such institutions, it is reasonable to assume that this will remain the case for some time to come. It may also be that those of us affiliated with such colleges have already spent too much effort and energy, too often, in the pursuit of image at the expense of substantive issues. Perhaps it is more important to concern ourselves with what we are than what someone else thinks we are.

Although they contrast with one another in terms of purpose and intent, two-year colleges often possess elements of similarity due to an environment unencumbered by such obstacles as tradition and uniformity. Within this setting new ideas or approaches are afforded the opportunity to flourish. This is good, positive, and healthy.

By virtue of design and necessity, junior colleges might be viewed as undergoing perpetual transformation. While this can be disturbing to some individuals, planned changes often generate a freshness of insight, dimension, and motivation. Change, of course, by its very nature is elusive; it is a state of becoming. Yet, without sacrifice to substance or quality, this mythical place can assume a tangible existence which is pleasant and beneficial to the point where educational endeavors become enjoyable while they are occurring instead of having such rewards postponed to some distant and obscure time.

In contemporary society, those charged with the responsibility of imparting and sharing knowledge on any campus may find it no easy task. Cumbersome rules, regulations, bureaucratic stumbling blocks, mandates, reports, guidelines, and a seemingly infinite variety of other burdensome adjunct responsibilities are certainly contributing factors in this instance. Specifically, the plight of the historian who is employed at a two-year college can prove to be one of frustration and disenchantment. With this in mind, let us examine in hypothetical, if not facetious, fashion some of the adversities facing the historian on the junior college campus.

The studies of major research firms tell the history instructor that the students in his classes are academically less prepared than they were a decade ago. But he already knows this. National historical organizations and associations have sent out questionnaires and determined that the state of the discipline is less than desirable. But he already knows this. There are reports that apathy and insensitivity are rampant throughout the student body. But he already knows this. What he does not know is how to respond to such things. To complicate matters even more, the president of the college has announced that in preparation for a forthcoming accreditation visit all faculty members must demonstrate the relevance of their respective disciplines, practice innovative teaching and learning techniques, be accountable for what they do, and update their courses by ordering new textbooks.

The instructor naturally turns for guidance to the chairman of the division (who happens to be in psychology). The chairman responds by sharing tidbits of wisdom relative to a grade inflation memorandum from the dean, then expounds on the theme that everyone is capable of learning something and,

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therefore, should not fail. Besides, behavior modification is for history students, too. Another colleague, who writes sociological articles for some obscure journal in the northwest, listens to the issues of the hour with a sympathetic ear, then comments on the aesthetic virtues of inner-city life styles and insists that the social experience of education is what really matters anyway.

Left to his own devices, the history instructor diligently consults those quarterly publications from which his graduate school mentors so often quoted with biblical reverence. With the exception of an occasional peptalk on the need for improving the teaching of history, he discovers that the price of cotton in Atlanta was not too good in late 1864, that blacks and whites have indeed had their differences throughout American history, that women are human beings who figure in the historical process, and that the reexaminers of the Spanish-American War are being reexamined.

Further research on another issue, namely the selection of textbooks, yields some disturbing data. The reviews in the same journals conclude that all books shed new light on something or other, should be read by someone, consist of strengths and weaknesses, are more or less well written, and ought to be on a bookshelf somewhere. But what is most interesting is that all the reviewers are associated with senior colleges and universities. Some of the latter are even his own former professors who, as he recalls, always made it a point of telling everyone within earshot that they had not taught a survey course since 1943. Or was it 1944?

Undaunted, the instructor undertakes the ultimate quest by visiting the greatest of all the halls of truth--the annual historical convention. Perhaps, he estimates, by engaging in conversation or just listening to the giants of the profession, some insight might be gathered. But a lot of the people in attendance are red-eyed and speak in unclear tongues. Others are too busy talking to one another on equal terms, or speculating on who has what "in press," or are otherwise absorbed in analyzing the pros and cons of the price of cotton in Atlanta in late 1864, or in reexamining the reexaminers of the Spanish-American War to assist.

Obviously, some of my remarks up to this point have been intentionally exaggerated. In so doing, I hope that we have not taken ourselves too seriously and perhaps by having the dark side accentuated, positive accomplishments and suggestions may appear that much better. Further, if nothing more has been accomplished than to underscore the forces and factors that affect the junior college historian and to point out the need for the individual to assume some responsibility in correcting these matters, then the effort was not futile.

A basic proposition governing the teaching of history at two-year colleges is that it is largely confined to introductory courses in American or Western (World) civilization, with the former being the most predominant. To many individuals in our discipline, the words "survey course" stimulate a negative response. The reasons for this are far too complex to be evaluated here, but I suspect that they have something to do with the conditioning process of graduate schools.

To be sure, the problems and challenges associated with the teaching of survey classes are numerous, but by no means insurmountable. If we consider the proposition that introductory history courses and the junior college have much in common, we might arrive at the following comparisons. Both are, or should be, dedicated to the philosophy of constructing a foundation for future growth. Both are, or should be, concerned with the broad spectrum of human development. Both are necessary to the fabric of an informed population. And both are, hopefully, responsive to the shifting needs of society.

Above all else, motivation must be viewed as a primary component in the successful conduct of history survey courses. Both students and faculty are affected accordingly. On the one hand, many historians teaching at the two-year level are very well prepared academically and desire to practice their profession in more complete fashion. Yet, because of where they are employed, their outlets and opportunities for publication and research are perhaps artificially narrowed. Moreover, the classroom setting with its survey format permits only limited utilization of the specialized knowledge and training the instructor received while in graduate school. The absence or near absence of colleagues with whom to dialogue also contributes to the instructor's sense of intellectual isolation and inner discontentment. All these factors are, at some time or other, bound to influence student and faculty motivation and, in turn, teaching effectiveness. But there are ways to begin to resolve such dilemmas.

More so than other institutions of higher learning, junior colleges are uniquely qualified by way of structure, philosophy, purpose, and design to create an atmosphere responsive to the needs of most persons who walk through their doors. While they are primarily "teaching institutions" and are not in the business of turning out sophisticated, discipline-oriented products, there is nothing inconsistent with expanding the dimensions of the learning climate nor in accomodating its relativity.

In order effectively to transmit and receive historical information, it is imperative that the student, regardless of aptitude level, be both a participant and an observer in the process. At my institution, due to University System regulations, for those students who do not meet requirements for admission to regular college programs, his or her exposure to history begins as part of the "Special Studies" program. "Special Studies" is a term used in Georgia to designate remedial work, usually in the areas of mathematics, reading, and English. To this list we have added Social Science 99, which consists, in part, of introducing the student to the discipline of history in a very elementary way by focusing on such things as what it is, how it works, its uses, its basic terminology, and its relationship to the individual.

The emphasis in history courses in the regular college program is decidedly interdisciplinary. As a matter of fact this philosophy permeates our entire college curriculum. When one is in the business of supplying general education, it is reasonable to expect that the narrow and the isolated should not receive excessive attention. For in so doing the spirit, if not the letter, of the compact between the college and the student is violated.

In order to strive toward the fulfillment of the philosophy that all things do not exist unto themselves, the historian has no small role to play. As a catalyst, the historian can and should find a place in science, mathematics, humanities, economics, and vocational trade classrooms. If the latter seems a bit far afield, let us not forget that Andrew Johnson was a tailor, Jesus Christ a carpenter, Herbert Hoover a surveyor, and Socrates a stone mason. Even in the physical education program there is ample opportunity for impact by the historian. In this instance such components of the curriculum as Sauntering (a blend of anatomy lessons, creative walking for fitness, and lectures on transcendentalism and the life and writings of Henry David Thoreau), The History of American Sports and Games, The History of World Sports and Games, The Aesthetics of Sports, and The History of Women in Sports afford occasion for input.

In survey history classes proper, students are required to complete what is termed a "special project." Special projects are designed to accomplish several objectives. First, it permits the student to depart from the survey format for the purpose of investigating, in detail, a single situation.

Second, since the student selects a topic of personal interest and studies it in isolation, relationships to the broader historical context often become apparent. Third, the special project requires that the student place himself or herself within the historical context and utilize creative and imaginative talents to further the explanation of the project. And last, the student finds it necessary to rapidly become familiar with general information concerning the course, as well as the more specialized resources from which such knowledge is derived.

What, then, is a special project assignment? Specifically, the project is separated into two parts, both of which must be related. The first phase concerns the selection of a topic which is manageable, flexible, and relevant. The student, after clearing the topic with the instructor, conducts an investigation on the availability of source material. After analyzing the research data, the student prepares an introductory statement of between 150 and 200 words. This statement is, in a sense, a preface and may assume any format from free verse to traditional narrative. However, the proviso that the statement be creative, original, historically accurate, and possessive of a viewpoint is absolute. In all cases the student must assume the posture of being either a participant in, or direct observer of, the event or topic selected.

Phase two is the heart of the special project. In this phase the student makes a determination regarding the method of delivery for an enlarged version of the introductory statement. The most common method employed is the narrative, although painting, drawing, music composition, photography, and oral delivery are both acceptable and encouraged. If the student chooses to write, the assignment is between 1200 and 1500 words. If another medium is employed, a written assignment is still required, the length of which varies according to the situation.

For purposes of clarity, allow me to reference some of the topics and methods by which students have accomplished their special projects. These include a newspaper interview with Nat Turner, a diary from the Alamo, a radio interview with the commander of the Merrimack, a letter to England from an early resident of Jamestown, a playlet concerning the trial and execution of a warlock in old Salem, a witness to the assassination of William McKinley, and a description of a fertilizer war in south Georgia during the late nineteenth century.

As demonstrated, student topics and approaches vary considerably. In order for the student to prepare the project, research opportunities must be made available on both the primary and secondary level. While secondary information speaks for itself, it is exposure to primary source material that contributes further dimension to the assignment. By way of assisting in the accomplishment of the latter objective, the college has developed an archives. The archives is designed to be "living" in the sense that the materials it contains are more than manuscript in nature. Antiques, photographs, posters, keepsakes, and related memorabilia and artifacts are included. Of course, manuscript collections are also incorporated.

The uses and purposes of the archives are several. First and foremost, the student has the opportunity to utilize, or at least be exposed to, primary source material. Further, since this information relates to an environment to which the student is accustomed, he is less intimidated and often stimulated by familiarity with and interest in the subject matter.

The archives also serves other functions. One the one hand, the learning resource center (library) possesses an extra dimension in that it periodically displays these holdings, thus demonstrating art forms within the historical process. Second, it cements relationships between the college

and the communities it services in that the heritage and culture of these areas are preserved within the context of the local environment. And last, faculty members who desire to practice the research aspect of their profession are afforded the opportunity to do so without having to "leave home."

The historical teaching and learning environment can also be supplemented in a variety of other ways. One of the most effective complements to the classroom is the Cultural Hour, which transpires every other Thursday from ten to eleven a.m. The subjects addressed during such sessions are both wide-ranging and narrow and are presented by students, faculty and guests. Topics for Cultural Hours have included: The life and career of Heinrich Schliemann, The Golden Age of Greece, Architecture in Spanish History, The World of Ancient Rome, The Changing Image of the American Hero, Social Darwinism, Personal Implications of the Vietnam War, and the Role of Music in History.

Since most junior colleges are prohibited from offering advanced courses in history, we have attempted to increase the student's desire for more specialized information through the development of what are called Special Seminars. Special Seminars carry one hour credit and usually convene at least once a week. Subjects for the seminars include Oral History, Women in History, Literature in History, Black History, Current History, and The American Presidency. Such courses are not designed to supplant advanced study; rather, they are intended to supplement and capitalize on student interest in the here and now.

For students who plan on majoring in history, or are otherwise motivated, another alternative, entitled Sophomore Study, is available. This program is similar to independent or directed study and research in the more traditional sense. A prescribed pattern is established whereby the student works with a committee throughout the experience and develops a theme in appropriate fashion according to negotiated guidelines.

To be sure, the great pivot around which any good and effective learning environment revolves inevitably relates to the quality of instruction. Within recent years this has been, unfortunately, somewhat overlooked. Instead, administrators, and especially students, have received a disproportionate share of attention. In reality, the educational process must be viewed as a three-sided venture. In order for instructors to be effective, administrators must contribute in no small way to the creation of a climate conducive to such by removing many of the artifical barriers which often get in the way. For example, such things as a broad definition of teaching loads and assignments, appropriation of resources for professional travel, encouragement of research and publication, provision for opportunities to experiment with new ideas and techniques in and out of the classroom, and a commitment to recognize personal achievement go some distance in this direction.

Students, of course, are the primary reason for a two-year college's existence. Even in view of restrictions which may be placed upon such institutions by way of outside forces, as for example in the area of curriculum control, ways to expand the dimensions of the learning environment are always possible. The question uppermost in the minds of all instructors is simply how can this best be achieved. Through creative thinking, program flexibility, experimentation, and planned change an answer or two might emerge.

By way of conclusion, allow me to summarize in this fashion. The teaching of history at junior colleges represents a challenging and rewarding experience for both faculty and students. But it is important to remember that history does not exist in isolation, nor can it be approached in that manner. History, as a discipline, must seek its own level by illustrating its relationship to the whole. There is indeed room for a variety of

approaches and alternatives to presenting the subject on the junior college campus. Once this is recognized and we stop dwelling on the differences between junior college students and faculty as opposed to those at other types of institutions, then history, like the junior college itself, will achieve its sense of place. To strive for less violates a basic premise of education itself--many things to many people. The time has come to cease to accentuate the obvious and, instead, to begin to do something about the problems facing both the discipline of history and those paid to teach it. If the status of history is in trouble nationally, it is not unreasonable to suggest that junior college instructors are partially responsible for such conditions. While no solution is as yet in sight, the quest for one must continue.