

## A Community College Liberal Arts Teacher's Story

by Lloyd Miller

I would like to share some of the highlights of my 30-year career as a “charter member” of DMACC’s Arts and Sciences Division. After a decade in the rarified world of higher academe at the U of Wisconsin in Madison and two years teaching at a community college in Illinois (a job that rescued me from the life of a perpetual graduate student), I came to DMACC in the summer of 1970. I had an MA in Ibero-American Studies with majors in anthropology and Spanish, a minor in Portuguese, and additional graduate credits in the history, economics, and politics of the Spanish and Portuguese speaking worlds.

I had the pleasure of meeting a handful of arts and sciences faculty who were already there or employed that summer, including Bruce Hann (English), Gary Wilcox (math), Tom Beck (political science), David Palmer (history) Ruth Aurelius (speech), and Rick Chapman (English). I taught a section of introductory Spanish during the summer while preparing for fall quarter when “college transfer” classes were officially to begin. Rus Slicker, the new dean of the Arts and Sciences Division, arrived mid-summer.

With Assistant Superintendent Phil Langerman, Rus spent his first month cobbling together a curriculum and a fall schedule. Though I was hired to teach Spanish, he readily accepted my offer to teach anthropology as well. I was soon to learn the value of being a generalist. During the early years, in addition to introductory courses in Spanish and anthropology, I taught social issues and human relations classes and team-taught a special topics seminar on racism. I also created and taught anthropology courses on culture and poverty and peoples and cultures of Mexico; this last one linked occasionally with educational tours to Mexico.

The first years were exciting. As a young faculty on the ground floor of the new Arts and Sciences Division, we were flexible and open to challenges. This was fortunate because our first challenge was to justify our existence! The Iowa Legislature had created community colleges in 1966. They differed from traditional two-year junior colleges by including three distinct educational divisions: college transfer (or college parallel) courses, vocational and career education, and adult and continuing education. In later years they acquired work force development responsibilities. They were indeed “comprehensive” institutions.

Some Iowans were opposed to the idea that community colleges should offer arts and sciences courses. At DMACC, one reason used to justify this opposition was that they would threaten enrollment in private liberal arts colleges, such as Drake or Grandview. The debate on this issue coincided with a national trend that marked the 1970s: that education should “provide more semiprofessional, technical, and skilled training to more of our citizens...”<sup>1</sup> In an attempt to abolish the dichotomy between academic and vocational education, US Office of Education Commissioner Sidney Marland introduced the politically more palatable term, “career education,” and stated, “All education is career education, or should be.”<sup>2</sup>

Ideology aside, DMACC arts and sciences education soon proved its worth. Our Area XI District (one of fifteen in the state) accounted for about 20 percent of Iowa’s population. Since (rightly or wrongly) we in the division felt that we were undervalued and underfunded relative to the other two divisions, we set about making sure that we became as good as possible. Faculty worked hard. I remember that several times during my first year, I spent all night in my office preparing for classes, catching a brief nap on the floor. The quarter system afforded us opportunities to experiment with curriculum like special topics seminars. Our student enrollment soon reached half or more of the institutional totals and never lost that position. After a few years, instructors received enough favorable student evaluations and feedback that we knew we were on the right track. Administrators realized that—whatever their feelings about “liberal arts elitists”—arts and sciences education was cost effective: large classes (meaning more state aid), relatively low equipment expenditures (for many classes just desks and a chalk board, so to speak), and great potential and flexibility for continued growth in size and diversity.

I recall, in the early years, searching in vain for DMACC advertising material that mentioned anything at all about arts and sciences or college transfer courses. Today, in 2015, I picked up a slick, 17-page booklet titled *UTC: University-College Transfer Program at DMACC*, entirely devoted to recruiting students, helping them navigate DMACC’s many offerings and options, and helping them transfer to senior institutions to earn a baccalaureate de-

---

<sup>1</sup> Venn, Grant: *Man, Education and Manpower*. American Association of School Administrators. 1970, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> “Career Education Now.” *NASSP Bulletin* 55:355 (May 1971). Reprinted in Lucas, Christopher J., editor, *Challenge and choice in Contemporary Education: Six Major Ideological Perspectives*. Macmillan, 1976.

gree. I also received in the mail recently an equally slick, glossy brochure titled *DMACC Magazine* from the DMACC Foundation, targeting retirees for contributions and featuring a cover photo and story of a young woman ESL (English as a Second Language) student with movie-star looks. It also advertises Alumni Association tours. It's as professionally prepared and attractive a document as any I've seen from a university.

I must confess that I was on a mission. Ever since I learned about anthropology as an undergraduate, I believed that the discipline—the history, biology and culture of human beings—should be about solving human problems and making the world a better place. Granted, a lofty goal, but anthropology had always been (and still is) the least known of the social and behavioral sciences. It's rarely taught in high schools and is usually an elective at colleges and universities, even those with their own anthropology departments. Relatively few community colleges offer it and even fewer of those offer more than one course. So, the opportunity to teach anthropology to freshman community college students, most of whom did not know what it was, presented a great but inspiring challenge.

One of the central ways by which anthropologists learn about people and their cultures is to observe them and participate in their activities, a process called "fieldwork." We are usually able to study other cultures more objectively than we can our own.

"As other peoples' worldviews come into focus, as we begin to grasp the patterns of their lives, laugh and cry with them, understand and share their feelings, the exotic becomes familiar and the blinders of ethnocentrism fall away. We begin to view our own culture, our own assumptions and beliefs as we do those of other folks: as integrated parts of the human condition."<sup>3</sup>

While in graduate school, I conducted fieldwork during the summer of 1963 among the Otomí people of central Mexico, and used the films, slides and anecdotal experiences I acquired to enhance and enrich my classes. I also designed some fieldwork techniques that students could do even in their introductory cultural anthropology classes. In 1973, I taught a summer section of Peoples and Cultures of Mexico and followed with an educational tour to Mexico. It was quite successful in that four of the participants were also students from the class who were doing projects for additional credit. While in Mexico City, I was able to rent a car and take them up to the Otomí village, site of my fieldwork a decade earlier.

In 1974, the college created a department structure for the three divisions. The departments for the Arts and Sciences Division were Communications and Humanities, Math and Sciences, and Social and Behavioral Sciences (SBS). I became Director of SBS, a full-time administrative position. Since faculty collectively bargained their contracts, I was removed from the bargaining unit and became supervisor to many of my colleagues and friends. Had I any doubts about my change in status, I was reminded of it whenever I would enter the Bldg. 2 faculty lounge and the conversations would cease.

Our first and perhaps most important task as departments was to create a general education core curriculum out of what was, until then, simply a collection of courses. The SBS department contained not only the academic social and behavioral sciences (anthropology, geography, history, psychology, political science, and sociology—economics belonged to the Business Department in the Career Education Division), but also para-professional programs like Criminal Justice, Human Services, Labor Studies, Legal Assistant, Recreational Leadership, and Teacher Associate. The SBS portion of the core requirements for an Associate in Arts (AA) Degree was 12 credit hours of social and behavioral science courses. Normally, we would include only the introductory or survey courses of each of the academic disciplines. However, a number of the para-professional program chairpersons wanted to include some of their program courses as well. The distinction between general academic courses and specialized career courses like those in their programs was not to dissuade them. They knew that required core courses would command enrollment, and that would affect program and job security! We eventually got it right, but the process was both stimulating and at times frustrating.

Our departments had district-wide responsibilities for both curriculum and personnel matters. While we Arts and Sciences directors were officed at Ankeny, we were able to coordinate staffing and encourage cooperation among instructors in a discipline teaching on different campuses. We could also encourage cooperation between full-time faculty and adjuncts. Often, when I hired an adjunct instructor, he or she would express appreciation at my providing a ready-made syllabus and assurance that a full-timer would be in contact and available for any help needed.

---

<sup>3</sup> Lloyd Miller: "An Accidental Anthropologist," in *The Tao of Anthropology*, Jack Kelso, editor. University Press of Florida, 2008, p. 183. A detailed look at the ideas that informed my teaching may be found in this anthropological autobiography. Copies of the book are in both DMACC's library and the Des Moines Public Library.

During the years I was a department director, I became aware that increasing numbers of our students were not qualified to take college-level courses. They lacked the requisite basic reading and numerical skills. DMACC did not allow college transfer courses to be tiered by skill level. The rationale was that as an open-door college, we should allow students to enroll in any course they wished. If they failed, which many were doing, they could always retake the course. We could and did test them and advised those in need to get help from the developmental education center, but too few did. While in California at a conference, I made a trip to Mt. San Jacinto Community College to see their developmental education program. Students were required to be tested for all the skills necessary to enroll in college transfer classes. With any deficiencies, they were required to get help at the developmental education center. They could study taped materials at their own pace, and tutors were always available to help them, but they had to pass those tests before they could enroll in college credit courses. It was as simple as that.

Many of us in the Arts and Sciences Division made repeated recommendations and lobbied the powers that be to allow prerequisites to college transfer courses, where advised, and to require college-level skills of our students. Some even suggested cynically that requiring students to meet college standards would make excessive demands on our developmental education resources and reduce enrollment in college transfer classes, while permitting under-qualified students to repeat classes would keep enrollments up and maintain state aid. After all, the state pays by enrollment head-count no matter how many times students re-enroll! In any case, the system was never changed while I was there. Even though educational quality in the US has generally continued its downward spiral, I think DMACC missed a real opportunity to improve student learning.

In 1982, the department director positions were abolished and the departmental structure was remodeled with deans as the first-line administrators. The stated purpose for the changes was to reduce administrative costs by removing the director level. I was moved to half-time teaching and the other half working in an International Trade Studies project. After a semester, my old teaching position of Spanish and anthropology became available and I was reinstated. I enjoyed the eight years I spent as a department director. The greater scope of influence challenged me with opportunities to affect educational change and try to improve student learning. I felt that I was good at conflict resolution and personnel matters, and, of course, in implementing educational philosophy, principles and standards. I was weaker in the detailed areas of budgeting and fiscal matters. I always thought of myself as an anthropologist doing administration rather than as an administrator per se. But I was happy to return to teaching; it was where I belonged.

For the life of me I cannot remember the circumstances leading up to this, but it turned out to be the educational highlight of my career. In 1988, I wrote and received a Fulbright-Hays Group Studies Abroad grant to take a group of teachers on a six-week educational tour of Mexico. The grant paid all expenses for 17 participants and included a planning trip to Mexico for me and a representative from DMACC's grant-writing department to negotiate arrangements with the University of Naucalpan, Des Moines's sister city, for lectures, tours, home stays and other incidentals.

DMACC formed an advisory board to screen applicants. Our final selection included professors from Drake, Grandview and DMACC, a variety of K-12 teachers from around our eleven-county area, and several technical specialists from the Area XI Educational Agency. The trip took place in summer 1989. During the first week, we stayed in the homes of gracious hosts from the Naucalpan community, attended lectures by various scholars and experts from Naucalpan University, and visited schools, museums and other places of educational interest. The second week we stayed at a small neighborhood hotel in Mexico City, attended lectures by Rod Camp, a Central College professor of political science and noted expert on Mexican politics and culture, and gorged ourselves on the cultural sights and sounds of (arguably) the world's largest city. Weeks three and four we traveled by bus through the states of Puebla, Oaxaca and Chiapas with the expert guidance and tutelage of Central College professors.

We spent the final two weeks in Merida, Yucatan, housed in the dorms of Central College's Semester Abroad program. As part of their reading for the trip, participants read an ethnography titled *Nine Mayan Women* by anthropologist Mary Elmendorf, a study based in the Mayan village of Chan Kom.<sup>4</sup> So, Georgeanne Huck, venerable director of Central College's Study Abroad program, took us all on a visit to the village and even introduced us to several of the women in the study.

To say that this trip was a success for all of us is perhaps an understatement. I kept in touch with some of the participants after we returned to the US. The effects of the experience were profound for some: on-the job promo-

---

<sup>4</sup> Chan Kom was first studied in the 1930s by anthropologist Robert Redfield of the University of Chicago. Other anthropologists followed and the village became famous in anthropological literature.

tions, career changes, in one case, a move to a Spanish-speaking country; (one participant divorced her husband, got a better job and “moved on.” A few years later, she was happily re-married and loving her job). For me, it was a chance to witness first-hand how anthropological education and experience can affect people’s lives, even those of adult professionals.

While we were with Georgeanne in Chan Kom, she told me that the current generation of men had not yet been studied and suggested that I ought to do that. At first I balked, saying that it had been 25 years since I was in the field. But then she introduced me to one of the political leaders, saying to him that I was interested in doing a study there. Surprisingly, he was very welcoming and told me that he could find me a place to stay and that I could purchase meals from his wife. I pondered that for some time. I wondered how I would fare after the long hiatus.

Finally, I decided to go the following summer and live in Chan Kom. I chose to do life histories of some of the men of my generation who were descended from the village’s founding patriarch. Shortly after my arrival, I discovered an interesting rift between two factions within the same family that had to do with the balance of political power in the village. I also kept a diary as both a supplement to my field notes and as a way to stave off loneliness. Here’s a brief excerpt:

**Sat. June 30 (a.m.)** Probably every fieldworker has these feelings, but I should nonetheless record them; it’ll be cathartic. I go through periods of widely varying moods. At times I’m extremely lethargic, my mind slows down and I find myself unproductive. It’s not only the heat, because these past few days have been cool and cloudy, with periods of rain. In these moments I wonder why indeed I came, how I’m going to collect all the data that’s waiting for me out there which the villagers are standing by, patiently but expectantly, to give me. It’s truly my move now. My rapport is well established; people are so “anthropology-wise” that they know the techniques of interviewing and at times I feel as though they, like knowing masters of the trade, are waiting for me to begin... At other times, however, I feel elated and full of energy. The fact that people do seem to respect my privacy and most (though certainly not all) tend toward shyness, reinforces this feeling of pressure or urgency to ‘get going;’ get active; do something anthropological.

I did indeed experience periods of both intense loneliness and self-doubt. For better or worse, I was self-funded and thus accountable only to myself. If I failed, no one would withdraw my support or fire me. This thought, it turned out, was a comfort.

During the summer, I received an invitation to present a paper at the annual conference of an organization called the Society for Anthropology in Community Colleges (SACC), a section of the American Anthropological Association (AAA), that October in—of all places—Merida, Yucatán! DMACC was good enough to provide travel expenses, so I went to Merida, joined SACC and presented a paper on my research in Chan Kom that summer.

The following year, I attended SACC’s annual conference in Akron, OH, and was asked to take over editorship of their newsletter, *SACC Notes*, then a newsy, informal publication of about six pages offset from a word processing document. I accepted the offer (which included contributing a monthly column on behalf of SACC to AAA’s newsletter, *Anthropology News*), and set about learning the art of desktop publishing. The “new” publication was soon re-titled *Teaching Anthropology: SACC Notes*, and grew into a biannual, non-peer reviewed journal featuring papers that (mostly) SACC members presented at SACC and AAA annual conferences. Also, each year at AAA meetings, SACC sponsored a panel, titled “Current Issues in Anthropology: Five-Fields Symposium,” for which it selected and invited a distinguished scholar from each of anthropology’s five sub-disciplines<sup>5</sup> to present, and which we published in the journal.

I am most grateful for the role DMACC played in the publication’s success. The college printed it and accepted our reimbursement at the cost rate (a fraction of what Kinko’s would have charged), and College Relations mailed them at its bulk rate. I always included an acknowledgement of this on our inside cover page. This service made ours the most cost-effective of all AAA’s section publications.

For me, these editorships were extremely rewarding. I had complete freedom to create each issue. I had no editorial board, but if a problem arose or I needed help or advice, SACC’s Executive Board was but an email away. A SACC member and professional editor for the Smithsonian Institution served as assistant editor. Her copy-editing and proofreading skills were impeccable, and I learned much from her over the years. I would often marvel at the realization that this publication emerged entirely from my Macintosh computer. Though I received no pay for this work, I did get much praise from my SACC colleagues, and I received several SACC President’s awards over the

---

<sup>5</sup> cultural, physical (biological), archaeology, linguistics, and applied anthropology

years that included cash. I occasionally kidded my colleagues that their praise really meant that they were thankful I did this so that none of them had to bother doing it (my mother would have called that “Kidding on the square”).

I retired from teaching at DMACC in 2000 and continued writing, creating, and editing until I finally stepped down in 2014. In 2009 we went digital. Since then, *SACC Notes* has appeared on our website, [saccweb.net](http://saccweb.net), and is available gratis to the public.

In 2005, I received a letter from Jack Kelso, a retired anthropologist from the University of Colorado, inviting me, along with 150 other “senior” anthropologists, to contribute essays on our professional careers to a collection of them he envisioned publishing. The project culminated in the afore-cited volume, *The Tao of Anthropology*. Of the twenty contributors, I am the only one from a community college.

When we moved to Des Moines in 1970, my family and I thought it would be for a year or two and then we’d continue on to California. That was 45 years ago! DMACC has provided me with a most satisfying and fulfilling professional life, for which I am deeply grateful.