

BUS RIDES AND FORKS IN THE ROAD:

The Making of a Public Scholar

By David D. Cooper

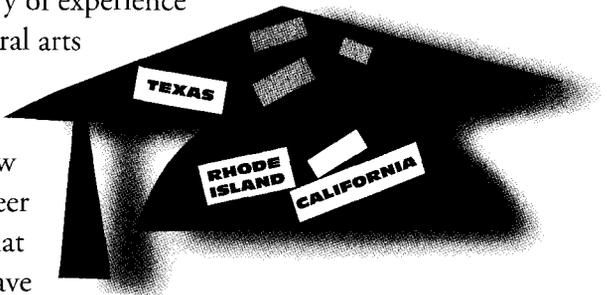
One consolation of finishing graduate work during the job market freeze-out in the late 1970s was the opportunity I had to experience, during a single semester, what struck me at the time as the full institutional spectrum of American postsecondary education. Facing unemployment lines jammed with fellow baby boomer academics and without the slightest prospect for a full-time tenure track position, I managed nonetheless to cobble together three part-time teaching jobs. After covering a couple sections of freshman English at Rhode Island College (RIC), I walked a few blocks through a working-class neighborhood in North Providence and caught the in-bound Smith Street bus. I hopped off a few stops later at Providence College (PC) where I taught another Composition course. Back on the bus, I transferred downtown to an East Side bus that groaned up the Benefit Street tunnel past the magisterial Unitarian Church and by “blue-blood” mansions. The bus dropped me off in front of Brown University’s Rockefeller Library where I presided over a senior seminar in Religious Studies. I dimly imagined the bus ride as a symbolic journey along an institutional axis that defined the organizing polarities of higher learning in America. Even more important, could the bus ride, I wondered, hold the secret to a personal myth that would make some sense out of the fear, second-guessing, and inner turbulence I was feeling at the precarious threshold of a career?

In an odd way that I could not fully understand at the time, the bus ride forced me to navigate an existential tack between the extremes and contradictions of American higher education. There were, after all, none of the obvious restrictions, benefits, or pretensions of social rank at the open-admission state college where I taught Composition, as there were at the highly selective, richly endowed private university among my super-bright students in the Religious Studies seminar. At the same time, my working-

class students at RIC, even though they fumbled with the rudiments of language and argument in their essays on “Starsky and Hutch,” were struggling (indeed, as I was) with the same perplexities of meaning, identity, and purpose as the Brown students who teased out their insights from the novels of Camus and George Bernanos. Meanwhile, to complicate matters my students at Providence College struck me as secure in a way that neither the RIC students or their Brown peers showed. Anchored in their Catholic tradition, the PC students’ self-questioning, while just as energetic, seemed less open-ended and less edged by ambivalence during discussions about moral and ethical dilemmas that inevitably surfaced in all three classrooms that semester, whether we were probing the finer points in Sartre’s *Nausea* or a segment from “Hawaii Five-0.” Thanks to the PC students, I surprised myself with a willingness to defend the role played by institutional heritage, especially in the Brown seminar where theology was often treated like a problem instead of a solution.

In any event, I found the challenges and opportunities of that year morally bracing, pedagogically challenging, and intellectually stimulating. I appreciated the populism, the passion for democratic openness, and the educational pragmatism that suffused the climate of Rhode Island College. I respected the commitment to character education at Providence College. I admired the high intellectual standards and extraordinary motivation and drive of my Brown students. Even though I was denied the security, responsibilities, and perquisites of life on the tenure track, the bus ride from North Providence to the East Side was a practical education in what the humanities were all about: commitment to the social witness of ideas, intellectual community, and the arc of hope that scribes the moral lives of students. I felt, naively no doubt, a little like Walt Whitman setting out on the open road of American higher learning . . . egalitarian, energetic, and free.

Nearly a quarter-century of experience teaching in a number of liberal arts colleges and public research universities from Rhode Island to California and a few moments of serious mid-career reflection reveal, however, that my symbolic journey may have

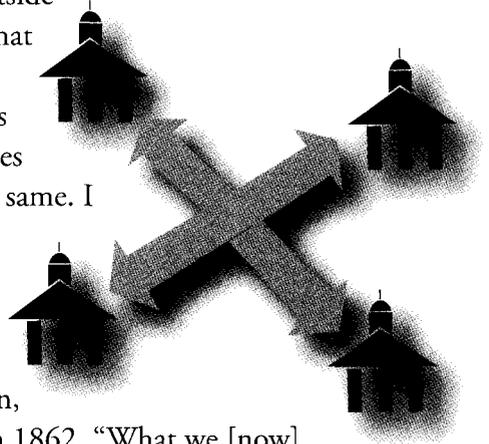


been, after all, only a bus ride. When I look back, trying to make some sense of the roads I have traveled since the patchwork of temporary teaching jobs in Providence, I see myself, like many other academics of my generation, facing hurdles, hitting roadblocks, wandering up cul de sacs, and eventually nudging into the clear. Most higher-education faculty, myself included, face the same pseudopredicament as the self-questioning traveler in Robert Frost's much-read and often-misunderstood poem "The Road Not Taken." At some point in our careers, we face forks in the road. One route, well paved and maintained, points to scholarship and research. Another leads to teaching. Bending to the underbrush, a third path, barely worn, fades off into service and the faint call of public work. In spite of institutional rituals and appointment, promotion, and tenure bylaws to the contrary, these routes remain, for most intents and purposes, separate pathways. Like Frost's traveler, faculty make their choices and stick to their career paths, "knowing how way leads on to way" and doubting "if I should ever come back" to take a different route.

For my part, I was dogged early on with persistent questions raised by a moribund job market on the one hand, and a nascent feeling for a dynamic and integrative learning life that stuck with me after the bus ride in Providence, on the other. Could I bring my "whole self" to a vocation in higher education? Could I practice a scholarship that nourished an active inner life, while forging strong and meaningful links to the public sphere? What would scholarship, teaching, and service look like if they supported both personal wholeness and the fulfillments of an engaged public life?

The decade of the 1980s was not kind to young academics in the humanities who charted a career course with those questions in mind. At least in my case, the generative impulses that naturally flow into teaching and service were quickly dammed up by the ethos of professionalism I encountered after leaving Providence for a string of adjunct teaching appointments from California and eventually to the upper Midwest. It is a species of professionalism familiar to critics of American higher education throughout the last century and culminating recently with critical voices that span a staggering ideological gamut, from Thomas Sowell to Camille Paglia. Thorstein Veblen, for example, launched a relentless early twentieth-century attack on university administrators he called "captains of erudition," whom he blamed for turning universities

into professional/commercial bureaucracies fundamentally no different than banks and breakfast cereal-manufacturers obsessed with profit, status, and prestige. More recently, Christopher Lasch, writing through the pain of an illness that would eventually take his life, lamented an educational establishment paralyzed by moral inertia, theoretical abstraction, and a thinly veiled contempt for the public outside the academy. The closer I got to that establishment through the turnstiles of adjunct appointments during the 1980s, the more colleges and universities began to look the same. I am reminded of Wendell Berry's comments about land grant colleges and their wholesale shift in institutional values since the inaugural land grant legislation, the Morrill Act, passed into law in 1862. "What we [now] have," Berry writes, "is a system of institutions which more and more resemble one another, like airports and motels, made increasingly uniform by the transience or rootlessness of their career-oriented faculties and the consequent inability to respond to local conditions. The [contemporary] professor lives in his career, in a ghetto of career-oriented fellow professors."



This story of increasing isolation from public life and the prevailing sanction of professional recognition and reward has been particularly true of the humanities. A rising chorus of critics from both within and outside the academy complain about the humanities' abandonment of a historic mission to democratize public culture and to practice a discourse that illuminates and clarifies the moral and ethical dimensions of problems that beset civic life. Addressing contemporary academics generally and zeroing in on humanities professors in particular, the "new elite," as Lasch calls them in *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, "live in a little world of their own, far removed from the everyday concerns of ordinary men and women" and speaking an incomprehensible jargon that completely subverts any "attempt to communicate with a broader audience, either as teachers or as writers."

Meanwhile, our students started voting with their feet. While undergraduates were stampeding into business majors, the

number of degrees awarded in the humanities began to plummet. In the mid-1970s, for every student majoring in English, five of her peers were pursuing degrees in Business Management. By 1994, that ratio sank to 1 out of 20. During the same period, humanists' teaching loads increased and their salaries proportionately declined. Release and research time steadily evaporated. Part-time and adjunct appointments swelled the faculty ranks while elite graduate programs, like mine at Brown, cut their yearly output of Ph.D.'s, on average, by nearly 30 students. It may be no surprise that SAT verbal scores have plunged. By 1998, an anemic 9 percent of students taking the PSAT indicated interest in the humanities.

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In spite of my youthful idealism and Pollyanna rationalizations, no matter how I sliced it, I could not avoid the painful truth that I was setting out in a profession whose vital signs were bad in 1978 and getting worse.

To compound matters, my liberal education led me to suspect a causal connection between the decline and discontent that wracked the humanities during the 1980s and 1990s and the loosening of the ligaments of democracy and civil society witnessed during the same period. "What do we see," Jean Bethke Elshtain bluntly asks, "when we look around [today]? We find deepening cynicism; the growth of corrosive forms of isolation, boredom, and despair; the weakening, in other words, of that world known as democratic civil society, a world of groups and associations and ties that bind." The power of the humanistic disciplines, I had been trained to believe, lies in their capacities to bridge private lives and public obligations — the inner and outer worlds — and enrich moral life, while simultaneously shaping a personal identity responsive to the commitments and responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy. That power has steadily waned during the last two decades only to be replaced by a corrosive academic professionalism that threatens to turn the academy, as Ernest Boyer puts it, into "a place for faculty to get tenured and students to get credentialed."

So it was against this backdrop that I began to chart a course through academe. It has been, and continues to be, a struggle played out in the moral realm where personal aspirations engage the larger professional community, and where personal career identity and responsibilities to public life are supposed to be worked out among a community of fellow practitioners/seekers. I

floundered trying to find ways to reconcile the quest for self-purpose, aspiration, commitment, and self-respect — the larger rhythms, in other words, of an individual moral life — against those standards by which the profession regards me and, by extension, trains me to regard myself.

Like so many academics of my generation, those reconciliations were made difficult by the chronically depressed conditions of an insanely competitive job market in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. After leaving Providence for the West Coast, I began my first full-time teaching job on a shoe-string contract as a “Visiting Lecturer” in the English department at a large public university. Even though my contract was renewed annually for several years, I remained cut off — it became clear to me from the outset of my appointment — from any hope of ever entering into the tenure system. I would never become a full institutional citizen and peer among the mostly older, tenured faculty in the department and the one or two lucky younger ones who had somehow slipped into the tenure stream right out of graduate school. A decadelong house guest in English, I was beginning to suffer acute ambivalence over what I had gotten myself into. In any event, convinced that I was a would-be scholar and teacher facing a hostile and unforgiving university, my inner world pitched headlong into the rapids of early mid-life crisis.

The institutional alienation and collegial dislocation I felt during that period, certainly extracted a serious toll on my professional, personal, and moral life. I was left with a residual skepticism over academic culture that, to this day, wells up on occasion and forces me to practice patience and restraint and seek the counsel of trusted colleagues, old mentors, intimates, and friends. But in spite of the difficult straits I found myself in during my turbulent thirties, nothing succeeded in completely undermining my basic commitment to finding what Thomas Merton called a “quiet but articulate place,” where I could dig in, find my voice, and carry on a life’s work.

In my not remarkable case, that search was, in part, foisted on me when I was dismissed from my visiting lectureship in 1988 and found myself back in the chaotic academic marketplace looking for work. I applied for a million teaching positions. As good fortune would have it, I landed one temporary two-year instructorship. After 14 hard years plying the adjunct teaching trade, I was soon hired into a regular appointment at the same

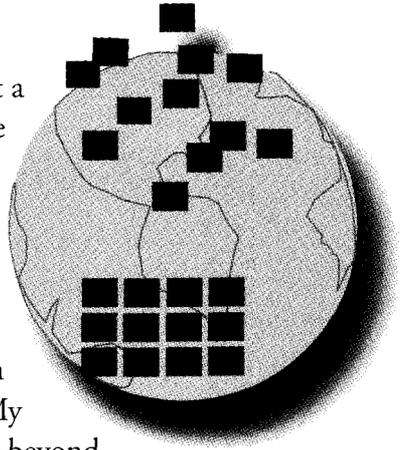
university and awarded tenure within 2 years. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that the terms of my professional renewal or emotional survival hinged solely on securing security of employment. An inner revolution was also taking place, spurred by ten years of identity confusion, role conflicts, and the inflated self-consciousness that comes from feelings of self-doubt. Granted a new beginning, my identity confusion gradually gave way to renewed purposefulness. I began to feel a pull of intimacy and belonging toward my new university. Integrity slowly replaced despair. An obsession with justice and fair treatment receded against a new awareness of and appreciation for the workings of mercy in my life. Promise and possibility appeared on a spiritual horizon once edged by dark feelings of stagnation and entrapment.

In particular, two new coordinates set the trajectory of my changing commitments as a teacher/scholar. First, the role that institutions play in shaping my identity and integrity became more important and obvious. While it is true that institutions sometimes betray us through rejection and, worse, indifference, they can also be, I sensed for the first time, important sources of affirmation, acceptance, and individuation. Second, a unitive spiritual and moral impulse began to inform and shape my intellectual and pedagogical work.

I began to realize that a life — especially a *teaching* life — lived outside of or free from the influence of institutions was more of an impoverishment than a virtue. Institutions of higher learning, by their very nature, shape us in profound ways. I still struggled, sometimes against strong currents stirred by old animosities, to become a better institutional citizen. But I also recognized the reciprocity between my individual strength and the larger mission and health of the public university that now employed me. I took on committee work, tentatively at first. I threw myself into curricular innovation. I shaped courses and learning projects that were consonant with the core values of my new university, a premier land grant institution. I even answered the call of academic service and took a temporary assignment as a program administrator.

More important, a harmonic drive began to pervade my calling as a teacher, my intellectual interests and worldview, as well as my philosophical inclinations. It was as if a new compass plotted my sense of moral direction. I became compelled to see the world around me and my place in it as a complex network of

connections, integrations, balances, couplings, and ties that bind, and not a place of chaos, division, irreconcilable differences, and movement against the grain. Edward O. Wilson recently jump-started an old philosophical term to describe this condition. Underlying all forms of knowledge and ways of knowing is an urge to unity he calls “consilience.” My new passion for connectivity went far beyond



epistemology, however, and spilled over into an ecological lucidity that brought moral fluency across all sorts of boundaries. My teaching, in particular, fell under the influence of what Parker Palmer considers one of a teacher’s greatest gifts, “a capacity for connectedness.” The challenge and the burden of the classroom became, in Palmer’s choice words, “to weave a complex web of connection” between myself, my subject, my students, and eventually my community and my scholarship “so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves. . . . The connections made by [such] teachers,” Palmer wisely notes, “are not held in their methods but in their hearts — meaning heart in its ancient sense, as the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self.”

These two guiding forces — the call of institutional citizenship and an integrative impulse that forms the moral gravity of my worldview — have become the latitude and longitude of my current working life. As such, they have brought me into the national service-learning movement and the practice of public scholarship while forcing me to question and reevaluate my place in the contemporary humanities.

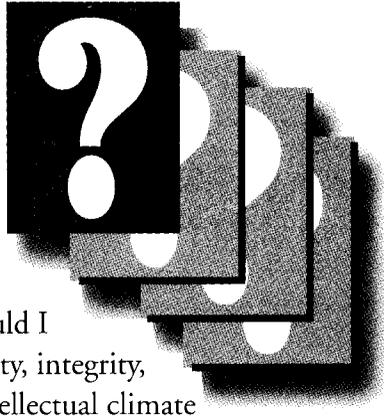
The passion for convergence, I should briefly explain, sets me at odds against a new generation of academics who have redefined the humanities agenda. While many academic fields are striving toward a vocabulary of disciplinary consilience, most humanities disciplines have taken a sharp opposite turn into postmodernism. Especially attractive are its explicit prohibitions against universal truths, its skepticism over all claims for connectivity and consensus, and its rejection of an Enlightenment discourse of “spirit,” “heart,” “will,” and “human self” — a vocabulary, as one critic has it, that “reeks of the rotting carcass of

liberal humanism.” The strong ideological position staked out in new humanities fields like cultural studies, bolstered by curriculum reforms inspired by hard-line multiculturalism, are heavily colored by postmodern skepticism over the possibilities for integration, consilience, and the “public sphere.” Bemoaning the hard inward turn of scholarship and postmodernism’s “spectatorial approach” to the public arena, Richard Rorty warns: “to step into the intellectual world which [postmodernists] inhabit is to move out of a world in which the citizens of a democracy can join forces to resist sadism and selfishness into a Gothic world in which democratic politics has become a farce.” I was drawn to the possibilities of public scholarship at a time when critical and theoretical underpinnings among new humanists were premised on liberation from suffocating notions of “public,” “common” knowledge, and “common” truths — all routinely disparaged as oppressive grand narratives and dismissed as archaic cartoons and pernicious fantasies.

For many of my younger colleagues, in particular, the democratic ties that bind individual lives to the common welfare are now viewed, through the skeptical lens of postmodernism, as political shackles that oppress. A shared body of moral values that integrates a curriculum into a social order threatens to become, we are warned, a pretense for domination by privileged classes and groups. Moreover, an interdisciplinary curriculum that aims for balance, commonality, and synthesis, according to postmodern pedagogy, is really no different than a curriculum that seeks to eradicate differences, thereby reinforcing ethnocentrism, cultural hegemony, and class oppression. Just at the same time, then, as my own academic work and teaching life broke through into a new set of commitments to transcend difference and seek common ground with others, my humanities colleagues were becoming far less concerned with the spirit of integration. They were much more preoccupied with ideology, identity politics, power, and the anxieties of the academic culture wars. Having emerged from the throes of personal crisis and professional divisions, I was bent on nourishing the fragile bond between the inner life and ethical responsibility to work, institution, and community — the essence, I believe, of a humanities education. Meanwhile, the disciplinary venue where I was situated to carry out my new work had become mental, abstract, contentious, and theory-driven.

In many ways, my beef with the contemporary humanities

reinvigorated some long-held commitments with important questions. How, for example, could I renew my own writing with the capacities and qualities of humanistic inquiry that I profess theoretically and defend in the abstract? How could I teach and write with moral clarity, integrity, authenticity, and heart in an intellectual climate that had become much too cerebral, too much “in the head”? Where could I find a community of fellow practitioners for whom the inner life, ethical commitment, and generative responsibility are central to career and not objects of derision or signs of philosophical bad faith? How could I find my way to common work in the university with its intellectual climate clouded by suspicion over consensus, commonality, and community?



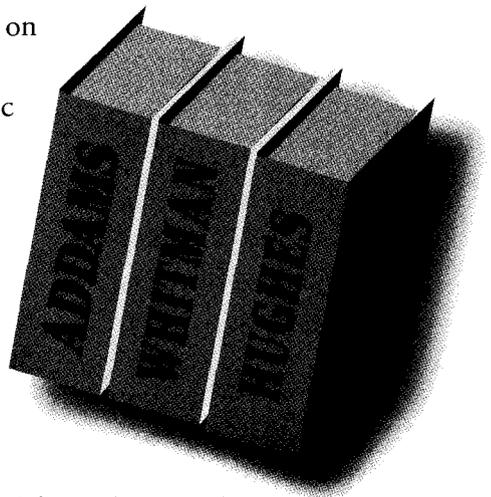
Such questions compelled me to conduct wide-ranging examinations of civic and democratic purpose as they relate to curriculum, scholarship, and my own sense of self-purpose as a member of my community and university. I emerged from my season of professional disappointments with a renewed generative commitment and a greater capacity and need to build connections with others. I was also looking for ways to integrate what struck me as an artificial and even hypocritical division of academic life, into the separate boxes of scholarship, teaching, and service. I was especially eager to explore avenues of service and find ways of becoming a participant in community and not, as I had been virtually my whole life, a spectator and critic quick to point out the failings and shortcomings of social life from my self-imposed vantage point, safely on the societal fringes. In addition to suiting up for community life, I wanted to integrate practices of service back into teaching and scholarship. Like many academics, however, I lacked a vehicle through which I could transform my teaching and scholarship into concrete expressions of social and moral action. “*How could I be of service?*” Now that I had gained a foothold on career security, I also lacked a model I could apply to integrate the professional pathways of teaching, research, and service. I found that vehicle and that model in service-learning pedagogy and philosophy, in a socially engaged scholarship, and in civic partnerships and community-based learning and research

practices that I easily recycled back into the challenges and rewards of curriculum-development work and program building.

First, I parlayed the precious franchise of tenure into an assignment as editorial consultant to the Center for Urban Affairs at my university. The outreach scholarship practiced by urbanists, public policy analysts, community activists, and graduate students pursuing degrees in community and economic development offered me new outlets and opened new intellectual horizons. I began experimenting with a public scholarship and a language of engagement that countered the theoretical and self-referential turn of work in my home College of Arts and Letters. It is a brand of public scholarship familiar to readers of the *Higher Education Exchange*. Scott Peters, for example, offers a simple litmus test of “how a scholar’s work of constructing and communicating knowledge might contribute to community-building, to public problem solving, to public creation, and to the process of coming to public judgment on what ought to be done. . . to address important public issues and problems. . . .” David Brown speaks of “‘interrogating practices’ that help citizens break through the proprietary languages of academics so that their specialized vocabularies can be made intelligible, be reflected on, and used without license by nonspecialists.”

Gradually, a wealth of new opportunities presented themselves where I could ply my modest talents as an editor, teacher, and writer and practice a nontechnical prose accessible to the world outside the academy. I designed, for example, a practicum for graduate students interested in applying public literacies to their theoretical and quantitative fields. I edited the proceedings of a statewide summit meeting on the future of Michigan cities sponsored by the Michigan House of Representatives’ Bi-partisan Urban Caucus. I helped plan the programs for Summer Institutes offered to community-based organizations and local nonprofits on such topics as closing the digital divide and creating sustainable communities. I wrote public policy briefs. I created opportunities for English majors to work as staff writers for community outreach units that specialized in youth and families, minority empowerment, education, and health and human services. Given my new working relationships with community partners, it was an easy and logical step to design and implement a general-education writing program back in my home department that featured community-based writing placements

and a curriculum that centered on civic life and writing in the public interest. I joined with a colleague and we published a comprehensive curriculum-development resource guide for other writing teachers that included theoretical, historical, and rhetorical analyses along with practical tools and a portfolio of sample student projects. With a diverse group of colleagues from across the country, I took part in a research seminar on democracy and deliberation in higher education, sponsored by the Kettering Foundation. Community-based learning and research, in short, fulfilled my continued longing for relevant public work. Moreover, my own research agenda was energized by the fresh enthusiasm I had for a socially engaged scholarship. I brought renewed interest, for example, to the strand of democratic humanism that runs through American civic life from Tocqueville to Martin Luther King, Jr. I examined the Settlement House movement and civil rights-era Citizenship Schools as historic hubs of civic education and applied humanities. I published articles on public philosophy, moral and civic literacy, rhetoric and public discourse. I wrote essays for more popular venues on liberal education, engaging young people in democratic practices, and the humanities and public life. Old voices spoke anew — Jane Addams, Walt Whitman, John Dewey, Langston Hughes.



In short, I found a way to pick up the gauntlet Ernest Boyer threw down in *Scholarship Reconsidered*: “Can America’s colleges and universities, with all the richness of their resources, be of greater service to the nation and the world? Can we define a scholarship in ways that respond more adequately to the urgent new realities both within the academy and beyond?” I entered as fully as I could into the public dimensions of the humanities. I believed for the first time in years that the humanities could play a public role envisioned by Jane Addams at Hull House: as a means of inviting citizens to be interpreters of their own lives, while bringing critical resources like analysis, reflection, deliberation, and ethical action to bear on social and

cultural renewal. At the same time, I underwent a more introspective sounding of my own moral life. I came to terms with questions that had vexed me. How can I redirect my scholarship into a life of meaningful service? Or refashion my service into reputable scholarship? And transform my teaching into both?

At the risk of overstatement, I have to say that community-responsive teaching initiatives and my gradual retooling as a public scholar made me *whole*. They provided a parallax, as Robert Frost puts it, to “unite / My avocation and my vocation / As my two eyes make one in sight.” They gave me a kind of template for professional integration just when I needed it to kick-start a career marked by enough conflict, separation, division, and isolation. I was able to find a way to act on the integrative drives that accompanied my professional reprieve. Public scholarship and service-learning put Humpty Dumpty back together again by converging the separate pathways of scholarship, teaching, and professional service into the thoroughfare of an integrated professional and personal life.

That convergence calls me back to the late 1970s and my stint as an itinerant composition teacher crisscrossing Providence on a bus, making connections — literally — between such seemingly disconnected classrooms, neighborhoods, and institutional missions. Crouched in the high anxieties of career uncertainty, I knew then — faintly, tentatively, quizzically — that this is what I really desired: the ethical life of service, intellectual stretch and challenge, and the call to moral duty. Twenty-five years later, I find myself on a bus ride with tenure, a witness to T.S. Eliot’s culminating wisdom in the *Four Quartets*:

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

AN ORGANIZING APPROACH TO TEACHING

By Phillip H. Sandro

How can teaching be conceived of as public and democratizing? What does that mean? There is some recent research on teaching and learning that converges with older literature and practice in experiential and critical education that begins to shed light on these questions. This research implies a set of approaches to teaching that are similar to what effective organizers do. I'd therefore like to make the case for an "organizing approach to teaching." Why? Because I think it can create shifts in political identities, catalyze new conceptions about democracy and citizenship for both students and faculty and develop skills to better address some debilitating fetters on U.S. democracy. Some of these fetters include a growing sense of powerlessness and cynicism, a retreat into privateness and away from participation in the public sphere, a deepening culture of detachment in academia and increasing levels of inequality and growing disparities in power among social groups in the United States. Embedded in my argument are framing conceptions about democracy, citizenship, and ways of knowing, conceptions that I will identify and discuss later.

I currently direct and teach an off-campus, credit-bearing, semesterlong, college-level program called the Metro Urban Studies Term (MUST) sponsored by a group of 15 colleges called the Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs (HECUA). I've been a community organizer and have been active in community development efforts. I have practiced the skills of organizing and teaching for years, but despite that I had not explicitly discovered their shared attributes until I delved into both during a sabbatical in 1999. I will draw from literature in this essay but I will also draw on my own experiences as a teacher and an organizer.

What has surprised me is how recent research on teaching and learning coming out of the Carnegie Institute for Teaching and Learning, the American Association of Higher Education and other sources resonates, albeit less politically, with prior writing by educators historically associated with experiential and critical edu-